

MARTIN CUTTS

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OXFORD GUIDE TO  
Plain English



OXFORD GUIDE TO  
**Plain English**

FIFTH EDITION

Martin Cutts

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## About the author

Martin Cutts is director of Clearest.co.uk Ltd, which owns the trading name Plain Language Commission. The company provides editorial and training services in the plain-language field and runs the Clear English Standard accreditation scheme for documents and websites. His books include *Lucid Law* (2000), *Clarifying Eurolaw* (2001), and *Clarifying EC Regulations* (co-author Emma Wagner, 2002), all available on free download from <<http://www.clearest.co.uk>>. At Liverpool



University, he edited the student newspaper *Guild and City Gazette* (1973–4) and co-edited the creative arts magazine *Sphinx*. From 1974 to 1976 he edited *Liverpool News*, a paper for low-literacy readers. From 1976 to 1978 he edited the *Salford Champion* news magazine. He is the editor of *Indlish* by Jyoti Sanyal (Viva Books, 2006), and consultant editor to the *Adult Learners' Writing Guide* by Ruth Thornton (Chambers, 2006). In 2013, he received the Christine Mowat Plain Language Achievement Award 'for outstanding contribution to plain language'. He has appeared on BBC1's *Watchdog* and ITV's *Martin Lewis Money Show* as well as BBC Radio 4's *You and Yours*, *Money Box*, and *Today*. He co-founded the Plain English Campaign in 1979 and remained a partner there until 1988.

## Starting points

What's the problem?

More than a century ago, the legendary Cambridge University professor Arthur Quiller-Couch encouraged his students to write in a clear style without inflated language. He liked plain English, he said, which he summarized as the difference between 'He was conveyed to his place of residence in an intoxicated condition' and 'He was carried home drunk'.

Quiller-Couch's advice remains relevant to today's academic, business, and official writers. During workshops, I often ask them to list the most desirable features of the reports, papers, and emails they have to read. Nearly always they say 'clear', 'brief', and 'easy to follow'. They loathe foggy language because it obscures meaning and muddles the mind, and they dislike badly organized material because it takes time and energy to disentangle. But, as the workshops show, what's really hard is for writers to spot these faults in their own work—sadly, we all have them—and put them right.

As the book will explore, fog appears in many guises. Long and tedious examples abound, but here are a few short ones to begin with. First this highly abstract statement from a 26-page job advert for a police officer in Northamptonshire:

Our Chief Constable must be able to see beyond the horizons of convention to make the paradigm shift.

This style of writing is not trivial or accidental. It acts as a subtle invitation to join the jargonaut club at the top of the police force. It's sending applicants a coded message that a fluent command of fog is required for the post. It would be a brave person who came for interview and said, 'If you give me this role, I'll start by ensuring your job adverts are clearer than this one.'

Visiting a school, I saw a notice in the reception area saying:

In the event of an emergency evacuation of these premises should you require assistance to facilitate your evacuation would you please advise your host or reception on arrival.

This exemplifies the widespread problem of posh, pretentious fog. Perhaps it could simply have said:

**Visitors:** if there's an emergency, will you need help to leave the building? If so, please tell reception or your host now.

A notice in the rear window of a minibus for disabled people also exceeded the usual inflations of official style, telling motorists:

Please leave sufficient space behind this vehicle to allow safe ingress and egress of mechanically propelled, seated position, ambulatory devices, by means of authorized lifting equipment thank you.

In more relaxed English, it could have said:

**Leave us a gap!**

Please leave at least 2 metres (6 feet) clear so we can lift wheelchairs in and out. Thanks.

In all these cases, my fancy is that the sinister Fog People, fluent speakers of Obscuranto, have influenced the authors to adopt over-formal language they'd never use in a face-to-face chat. The result is that simple ideas have become overdressed.

Of course, writing clear documents is much tougher for all of us than scoffing at poor ones. We have to think hard about what we're going to say, why we're saying it, and who'll be reading it. The reward, though, is that readers usually prefer the result. Probably they won't even notice, and that's one definition of good writing. This book aims to help you reach that goal more quickly.

There's a daily trickle of legalistic fog. My postbag includes a company's acknowledgement of some money I've sent it to invest, which says:

The said aggregate further single premium shall be apportioned equally among the existing Policies and consequently in relation to each such Policy the Further

Minimum Sum Assured secured by the part of the said aggregate further single premium apportioned thereto shall be a sum equal to the aggregate Further Minimum Sum Assured specified in the Schedule divided by the total number of the existing Policies the Further Participating Sum Assured so secured shall be a sum equal to the aggregate Further Participating Sum Assured so specified divided by the total number of the existing Policies and the amount of the further single premium paid under each of the existing Policies shall be a sum equal to the further aggregate single premium so specified divided by the total number of the existing Policies

That's a single unpunctuated sentence of 132 words, without even a full stop at the end—rampant legalese.

My post also includes a bank letter, dated 10 July, full of error-strewn fog. The *italics* are mine but the words are the bank's:

I am *writing* to you *in regards* to a cheque that was paid into your account on the 7th May. *Unfortunately* this credit was paid into your account a second time by mistake on the 8th May. Hence, today, (*10th May*) we will be debiting your account for the sum of £843.00. I apologise for the *inconvenience* this has caused you.

So many blunders (including the date it was written) in so short a document. Banks need customers' confidence and trust, so this doesn't help.

Then there's a letter from the 'director of quality' of a college—copied to me by a student who has used its grievance procedure—which includes the statement:

From the plethora of letters that have been received from you ... it is impossible to determine the gravamen of your complaint.

The student asks me whether *plethora* and *gravamen*—along with such phrases as *preliminary procedural representations* and *preliminary representations on points of procedure*—are acceptable in a letter like this. He says: 'My opinion is that he's deliberately trying to confuse me.' Just so, and using a fog of high-register language is also a way of pulling rank.

A resident of central Wales sends me a 49,000-word consultation paper from the Welsh Assembly, asking if I can make sense of it as he'd

like to complete the included questionnaire. It includes sentences of abstract fog like:

- The whole hierarchy from waste minimisation through collection, recycling and residual dispersal has spatial implications.
- The diversity of Central Wales' environment also offers unrealised economic potential if developed sensitively and knowledge based industries, new environmental technologies and sustainable forms of high-quality tourism, both inland and at the coast, can be encouraged.

Texts like this make readers halt, backtrack, and—often—give up. So the consultation's merits may be lost amid the turgid prose.

And finally my postbag includes a charity's briefing paper, written in a fog of full-fat Obscuranto:

The 'onion model'...set out...the Government's vision of what was needed to achieve whole system change. Recent tragic events have demonstrated that there is an urgent need for still greater integration at every layer of the 'onion' in front-line delivery, processes, strategy and governance. At the level of service delivery in particular there remains significant practical, philosophical and resource barriers to full integration. Further legislative changes at governance level alone will not automatically make it easier to address these barriers.

The eyes glaze over and the brain fails—how could anyone have thought this was publishable? How much time of how many salaried officials was eventually wasted trying to make sense of it and, perhaps, respond? Did anyone dare to return it with a note saying: 'Studied but not understood—please rewrite in normal English.'

Unclear writing flourishes partly because few people are willing to say they don't understand. Such confessions by public figures are so rare that they tend to make the news. In 2007, when the Web was still uncharted territory to many, Judge Peter Openshaw was presiding over the trial of three alleged hackers and had to ask prosecutors to explain terms like *browser*, *broadband*, and *dial-up*:

The trouble is I don't understand the language. I don't really understand what a website is...I haven't quite grasped the concepts.

When trying to understand old-style legislation, the bench has sometimes expressed its dismay even more colourfully. Here's part

of Lord Justice Harman's famous judgment in *Davy v Leeds Corporation* (1964):

To reach a conclusion on this matter involved the court in wading through a monstrous legislative morass, staggering from stone to stone and ignoring the marsh gas exhaling from the forest of schedules lining the way on each side. I regarded it at one time, I must confess, as a Slough of Despond through which the court would never drag its feet but I have, by leaping from tussock to tussock as best I might, eventually, pale and exhausted, reached the other side.

At a parish council meeting in 2006, councillor Alan Wilkinson said a report from Teesdale district council was 'incomprehensible to any normal person' and its reference to 'involuntary exclusion from the world of work' meant nothing more than 'unemployment'. Warming to his theme, the councillor said:

Nobody talks like this; nobody reads books written like this. Frankly it's a turnoff, and it's not surprising that we are having trouble attracting new members.

The 18,000-word report he complained about was called 'Sustainability appraisal scoping report for the local development framework core strategy'—those noun strings being a sure sign that the Fog People had been at work. The report included statements like 'There is a high level of social capital and community cohesion assisted by a strong foundation of participatory community activity and associated support organisations' and 'The more rural wards also suffer from high levels of employment deprivation.' (In other words, 'Unemployment is much higher in the countryside.') Not all the councillors agreed with Wilkinson, though. Showing why defeating the Fog People can be so difficult, one stoutly defended the authors:

This is just the way council reports are written, and if you want to be a councillor then you need to understand that. If you go to France, they speak French. Here in the council, we speak like this.

It's not just money and effort that are wasted by verbal confusion—it can cost lives. In 1977, two passenger aircraft collided at Tenerife airport, killing 583 people. The crash was largely caused by misunderstandings about the phrase '*at takeoff*'. One plane's flight crew used it to mean

they were *in the process of taking off*, while the tower controller took it to mean the plane was *at the takeoff point*.

Such ambiguity lurks as an ever-present danger in any language that depends so much on context for its meaning. Does our friendly high-street ‘family butcher’ cut up meat or butcher families? Does a ‘field shelter’ protect a field or keep rain off the cows? Does ‘Take him out!’ order you to kill your enemy or go on a date with him? Sometimes it really matters: Derek Bentley, aged 19, was found guilty of murder and hanged in 1953 after a British jury found that his alleged remark ‘Let him have it, Chris!’ urged his accomplice to gun down a police officer rather than surrender his weapon.

A recurring theme at the inquest into the death of 52 people in the London terrorist bombings on 7 July 2005 was the obscure language employed by police and fire chiefs, some of whom had great difficulty using everyday words in the courtroom—they adopted management-speak that infuriated the coroner, Lady Justice Hallett. It must have upset the victims’ families too, as their recommendations included ‘use of plain English by emergency services’. Lady Hallett berated officers for using jargon that might hinder rescuers:

This isn’t just somebody being pedantic about the use of English...When it comes to managing incidents, people don’t understand what the other person[’s job role] is. I don’t know whether a crew manager is somebody who is responsible for supplies or is used to fighting fires.

The coroner’s final report included a section headed *The use of ‘plain English’*. Questioning whether another service would understand what was meant if told that a ‘management conference demountable unit [i.e. a mobile control-room] is on the way from the management resource centre’, Lady Hallett said in court:

What worries me is all you senior people of these organisations are allowing yourselves to be taken over by management jargon... I just think that you... need to say we have to communicate with people in plain English.

Of course, what is plain English to one person may be obscure to another, as this book will explore, but her point was well made. She’d rubbed shoulders with the Fog People, and she didn’t like their style.

It's obvious to anyone who's been around since the late 1970s, when the modern plain-English movement got going, that government and other official documents meant for the public have become much clearer in style and structure, with health and welfare leaflets particularly being much improved. Today, it's rare to find a real shocker because ideas about writing plain English have become embedded in many official standards. The 2018 online version of the British passport renewal form, for example, is a pleasure to complete. The gov.uk website offers a writing style guide for civil servants and a specific guide on how to write for the website (*Writing for gov.uk—How to write well for your audience, including specialists*). One section says, 'Plain English is the whole ethos of gov.uk: it's a way of writing,' and spells out the need to use everyday vocabulary:

Do not use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. Use 'buy' instead of 'purchase', 'help' instead of 'assist', and 'about' instead of 'approximately'. We also lose trust from people if we write government 'buzzwords' and jargon. Often, these words are too general and vague and can lead to misinterpretation or empty, meaningless text. We can do without these words. Write conversationally—picture your audience and write as if you were talking to them one-to-one but with the authority of someone who can actively help.

That last point brings to mind the conversational style of a famous letter co-written by four Bletchley Park codebreakers—including the computer pioneer Alan Turing—to the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, in 1941. They were desperate for extra staff but Whitehall officials had repeatedly ignored their requests, so they plumped for route one—a hand-delivered letter to 10 Downing Street that began:

Some weeks ago you paid us the honour of a visit, and we believe that you regard our work as important. You will have seen that, thanks largely to the energy and foresight of Commander Travis, we have been well supplied with the 'bombes' for the breaking of the German Enigma codes. We think, however, that you ought to know that this work is being held up, and in some cases is not being done at all, principally because we cannot get sufficient staff to deal with it. Our reason for writing to you direct is that for months we have done everything that we possibly can through the normal channels, and that we despair of any early improvement without your intervention. No doubt in the long run these particular requirements



will be met, but meanwhile still more precious months will have been wasted, and as our needs are continually expanding we see little hope of ever being adequately staffed.

The average sentence length—32 words—may be a bit high, but a readability test on this passage (see chapter 19) shows a British reading age of 16, so it was an easy read for Churchill. The style is direct, with fairly simple vocabulary and little flummery. Within a day, Churchill had minuted his chief of staff, General Ismay: ‘ACTION THIS DAY Make sure they have all they want on extreme priority and report to me that this has been done.’ He had his faults, but verbosity wasn’t one of them.

### Guidelines not rules

The book focuses on writing **essential information**, a loose description that includes business and government letters, emails, webpages, and reports; consumer contracts; labels and product instructions; leaflets and forms on tax, health, welfare, and legal rights; parking signs; legal judgments; and rules, regulations, and laws. These things may seem humdrum compared to the mighty works of literature but they help oil the engines of industry, commerce, and administration. They provide information that, if misunderstood or half understood, disadvantages people, oppresses them, or—at the least—wastes their time and money. The book has one main aim: to help you write and set out essential information more clearly. It does this by suggesting and justifying the guidelines listed on page xxv.

I deliberately say guidelines, not rules. There’s a guideline to aim for an average sentence length of 15–20 words, but there’s no rule banning sentences of more than 20 words. There’s a guideline to use words your readers are likely to understand, but there’s no rule banning obscure terms as long as you explain them to the uninitiated. Just as important, if a difficult word is really the best word for the job, you should use it.

So this isn’t a simple recipe book of do’s and don’ts. Writing will still be hard work—perhaps the hardest work you do—but the guidelines

should make it easier. The book is not, of course, about writing novels, plays, poetry, or newspapers, though I use a few of those as sources for examples.

The examples I give are genuine apart from some obvious fictions I've created, mainly in chapter 2. I've sometimes changed words to avoid identifying authors or to add essential context. For some examples, I've provided rewrites. These are not meant to be the sole or perfect solutions—there are many ways of saying the same thing.

No writing can truly be regarded as clearer or better until users' performance proves it. Several times I mention the value of testing high-use documents with likely users, to see whether they can follow the information and act on it. I've taken my own advice by informally testing the clarity of some of the 'before' and 'after' examples. A focus group of 35 people rated them for clarity, giving a score out of 20. The group included police officers, firefighters, librarians, unemployed people, teachers, pensioners, booksellers, and gardeners. It wasn't representative of the population but gives a snapshot of readers' views.

In general, the focus group preferred the versions that reflected my guidelines, rating them significantly clearer than the originals. That doesn't prove these versions would be better understood in real life, but it's an indicator. The results, shown at relevant points in the text, encourage me to recommend the guidelines more confidently. There's research evidence to support most of the guidelines, though I've not always quoted it because the book is not an academic work. In any case, several of the guidelines are obvious common sense.

What has motivated me and others to work in the plain-English field is that clearer documents can improve people's access to services, benefits, justice, and a fair deal. If people understand what they're asked to read and sign, they can make better-informed choices and know more about their rights and duties. They might also see more clearly what business and government are doing. Plain English should be an accepted part of plain dealing between consumers and business, and between citizens and the State.

## What's meant by plain English?

The guidelines will help you create plain-English documents. But what's meant by plain English (or 'plain language', as it's sometimes called outside the UK)? To pin it down, members of PLAIN—the association of plain-language professionals—adopted the following definition in 2014:

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

So this means authors need to make informed judgements about whether the material is clear enough to be easily understood. It also means using good organization and layout to help readers navigate a path through the material and easily use what they find. It doesn't mean always using simple words at the expense of the most accurate or writing whole documents in childish language—even if, as some research claims, about 5 million adults in the UK and 70 million in the US read and write below the level at which their skills are useful to them in their daily life (functional literacy).

According to data from the UK's National Literacy Trust website, the average reading age among adults seems to be about 13, or three years below school-leaving age. Not high, but at least it's well above functional-literacy level. This means documents for a mass audience need to be pitched at about reading age 13. Plain-English guidelines can help authors achieve this. Chapter 19 offers ideas on how to check whether your writing is around this level.

Plain English embraces honesty and transparency, as well as clarity—or should do. It was disappointing that the UK government failed to give detailed and impartial information about the 2016 referendum on whether or not to leave the EU (the Brexit vote), issuing only a short and strongly pro-Remain leaflet to every household. What an opportunity missed to get a group of wise people to write something deep, clear, and even-handed that the public could refer to before deciding which way to vote.

Good information does not lie, fudge, or tell half-truths, especially when it comes from those who are socially or financially dominant. So health leaflets should not withhold facts that some might find unpalatable, such as the higher risk to children of gene-based health problems when people of close kinship intermarry or contract cousin marriages over several generations. Products claiming green credentials should not use duplicitous labels like ‘recyclable’, since almost anything can be recycled, or ‘harvested from sustainable forests’, since all forests are sustainable and what matters is whether they are indeed sustained, and how. Supermarkets should not imply their products come from named—apparently British—farms that are in fact fictitious, or mislead by stating that wet wipes that take years to rot are ‘flushable’. Many organizations routinely voice a commitment to plain English, and occasionally this reflects reality; but when the news media carry almost daily evidence of systematic duplicity by social-media giants, banks, pharmaceutical firms, police agencies, and government departments, it’s right to look for proof behind their pledges.

Just because a document or website is written in plain English doesn’t make its contents true, reasonable, ethical, fair, or in any other way virtuous or worth reading. Bad policies, bad arguments, and bad laws are not magically made good by being written in plain English.

Plain English is not an absolute: what is plain to an audience of scientists, bridge players, or philosophers may be obscure to everyone else. And because of variations in usage across the English-speaking world, what is plain in England may be obscure in India or the US. Similarly, what is plain today may be obscure a hundred years from now because vocabulary, language preferences, and readers’ prior knowledge alter over time.

## Does plain English work?

Research shows that documents carefully crafted in plain English can improve readers’ comprehension. In an American study of instructions given by word of mouth to jurors, the plain versions improved comprehension by 14 percentage points, from 45 per cent to 59 per cent.

In a further study, the same instructions were given in both speech and writing. Jurors understood the plain versions ‘almost fully’, said the researchers. In a study to test understanding of medical consent forms in the US, readers of the original form could answer correctly only 2.36 questions out of 5. Using the plainer form, they got 4.52 questions right, a 91 per cent improvement; they also took much less time to answer.

In 1999 the US Social Security Administration wanted to issue an annual benefit statement to every working American over 25 years old, some 125 million people. Plain-language experts at the Center for Clear Communication, Inc. tested the previous six-page form and found it poorly structured and presented, with some important details buried. So they wrote, designed, and pilot-tested four prototypes of a new form. These versions had a clear title, good organization, and a design that reduced production and handling costs. They were consumer-tested through a national mail survey of 16,000 people. A Gallup survey in 2000 reported that ‘The results to date are glowing. The new social security statements have played a significant role in increasing Americans’ understanding of social security.’

Much of the most convincing research on the benefits of plain English relates to legal documents. And the most telling point of all is that to my knowledge no company in an English-speaking country that has issued a plain-English insurance policy, pension contract, or bank guarantee has ever reverted to a traditional, legalistic style of wording.

Professor Joseph Kimble’s authoritative book *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* (2012) devotes some 64 pages to projects that have shown what he calls ‘the extraordinary benefits’ of plain language in saving money and improving people’s lives across several continents.

UK consumer contracts—plain English required by law

Many jurisdictions in English-speaking countries and throughout the European Union require clarity in consumer contracts. In the UK, the relevant law is the Consumer Rights Act 2015. It applies a test of fairness

to terms used by traders in transactions with consumers. A separate and distinct requirement is that written terms of a consumer contract or consumer notice must be ‘transparent’.

The main aspect of transparency is that each term should be plain and intelligible to the average person, whom the Act defines as ‘a consumer who is reasonably well informed, observant and circumspect’.

The official guidance to the Act is shown on the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) website. I’ll pick out some of its main points because they help show the legal framework. They also show how far we’ve come since the first edition of this book appeared in 1995.

The guidance says: ‘What may appear to be relatively straightforward technicalities can have onerous implications of which consumers are likely to be unaware.’ Among its examples of technicalities are clauses that use language like ‘indemnity’ and ‘statutory rights’.

If a term is not transparent (i.e. not plain and intelligible) or prominent **and** it creates a ‘significant imbalance, contrary to the requirements of good faith, to the detriment of consumers’, then it’s unfair. This means it’s not legally binding on consumers, who can challenge it in the courts.

If a term fails **only** the transparency test, a trader may still enforce it against an individual consumer. But if the term is ambiguous, it must be interpreted in the way most favourable to the consumer. The CMA may take enforcement action against traders who use terms that fail on transparency alone.

On the style and structure of contracts, the guidance says:

Ordinary words should be used as far as possible and in their normal sense. In the CMA’s view, words that are not literally unintelligible are likely to fail the transparency test where, for instance, as a result of vagueness of language, their effect is likely to be unclear or misleading to the average consumer. To ensure that terms are fully intelligible, there is a need for clarity in the way terms are organised. Transparency is more likely to be achieved where sentences are short, and the text of the contract is broken up with easily understood subheadings covering recognisably similar issues. Statutory references, elaborate definitions, and extensive cross-referencing should be avoided.

Tiny print is outlawed: ‘In written contracts, the print must be clear. This depends not only on the size of font used but also its colour, the background and, where paper is used, its quality.’

Lack of enforcement against foggy contract language has hit one group of consumers very hard—motorists. If they go to a privately run car park, they’re effectively agreeing to the conditions stated on the entrance boards and other signs dotted around the site, which sometimes they don’t see and often they don’t read. Lurking in the small print and legalistic jargon are heavy fees—often £80 to £100—for such contraventions as overstaying the free-to-park time by a few minutes, walking off the landowner’s site, and making an error when punching in the car number at the pay-and-display machine. The car-park operators, acting under agreements with supermarket chains and other landowners, make much of their money from this fee-demand income, which incentivizes them to impose large numbers of tickets. These they pursue with aggressive letters threatening court action and costs.

The operators ticketed 5.65 million drivers in 2017–18 (RAC Foundation figures), which means a potential income of about £450 million. Operators that have the right to get motorists’ data from the government are largely self-regulated by their own trade body; and although the signs should comply with the law on plain language and a code of practice that emphasizes the need for clarity, they are often far from clear. One sign says:

Every person who enters and uses this car parking facility agrees to be bound by the car parks [*sic*] terms and conditions of use and warrant [*sic*] that they are the registered keeper of the vehicle or have been authorised by the registered keeper to enter into the contract. In the event that an authorised driver other than the registered keeper of the vehicle is responsible for a breach of the car parks [*sic*] terms and conditions, the registered keeper will be required to disclose details of the driver responsible. Failure to provide the correct details of the driver and act unreasonably may result in an application to the courts for an order for the registered keeper to disclose the requested information and additional costs will be incurred.

The final sentence can mean only that the company requires the keeper to ‘act unreasonably’—surely a first in contract drafting. This text and several other muddled sign wordings have been approved by the responsible trade body as being in ‘plain and intelligible language’. Thus is the meaning of ‘plain language’ skewed.

How you may want to use this book

I’ve set out the book in the order in which I suggest you read it, with the guidelines—and a summary of the main guidelines—on the next few pages. This accords with my advice to put the big news early in a document. From the summary of guidelines, you may then want to delve into chapters that particularly interest you or help with a current need. Otherwise, if you’re reading the book as a student or on the way to work, you may like to tackle a chapter a day. Most books—especially those about writing—are far too long, so I’ve tried to keep this one short.



# The thirty guidelines

Each chapter begins with a guideline that is then expanded and discussed. The thirty guidelines are set out below.

- 1 Plan before you write.
- 2 Organize your material so readers can see the important information early and navigate the document easily.
- 3 Over the whole document, make the average sentence length 15–20 words.
- 4 Use words your readers are likely to understand.
- 5 Use only as many words as you need for meaning and tone of voice.
- 6 Prefer active-voice verbs unless there's a good reason for using the passive.
- 7 Use good verbs to express the action in your sentences.
- 8 Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.
- 9 Put your points positively when you can.
- 10 Put accurate punctuation at the centre of your writing.
- 11 Use good grammar, but relax—you don't need to know hundreds of grammatical terms.
- 12 Check your material before the readers do.
- 13 Think carefully how—or whether or not—you'll use certain words and phrases.
- 14 Choose only Latin or French that doesn't seem Latin or French.
- 15 Untie noun strings.
- 16 Cross-references mean cross readers, so minimize them.
- 17 Avoid being enslaved by writing myths.
- 18 Avoid using clichés.
- 19 Remember that the population's average reading age is about 13.
- 20 In emails and letters, avoid fusty first sentences and clichéd finishes.

- 21 Take as much care with emails as you would with the rest of your writing.
- 22 Use inclusive language when it's accurate and feasible.
- 23 Consider different ways of setting out your information.
- 24 Treat customers fairly with clear, well-written correspondence.
- 25 Supervise colleagues' writing carefully and considerately to boost their morale and effectiveness.
- 26 Devote special effort to producing lucid and well-organized instructions.
- 27 Don't waffle on the Web—put the big news early and make the style and structure punchy.
- 28 Apply plain-English techniques to legal documents such as insurance policies, car-hire agreements, laws, and wills.
- 29 For people with low literacy, cut out the fine detail, be brief, and (ideally) test your documents with the real experts—the readers.
- 30 Use clear layout to display your words well.

# Summary of the twelve main guidelines

## 1—Plan before you write.

When Venus and Serena Williams were still under 5, their ambitious father drafted a 78-page plan—yes, perhaps a bit on the long side—mapping out their ascent from playing on public tennis courts to world domination. His plan paid off handsomely.

For most of us, planning's an essential first step in any writing task. We benefit from jotting down on paper or screen the document's main purpose, our likely readership, and the points we'll include. This breaks the deadlock and creates a structured start.

Then we organize the points into a numbered sequence or under headings and subheadings. Next we expand the points into rough sentences, which begin to form a first draft. Much of the quality in a document comes from editing and polishing the draft, then doing the same repeatedly for as long as you're improving its content, structure, and style.

See—chapter 1, which describes some simple planning techniques and explains the PROCESS method, a systematic five-step approach to writing.

## 2—Organize your material so readers can see the important information early and navigate the document easily.

When you're writing for busy people, they want to **get in, get on, and get out**. So you need to give them a clear structure they can see instantly. It may be questions and answers; headings and subheadings; chronological order; or the top-heavy triangle (newsy points in descending order of importance).

Normally, put the big news early—unless, of course, it's particularly upsetting or surprising, when a gentle or diplomatic lead-in (or perhaps a phone call) will be better. If your document has more than a few

hundred words, readers may also benefit from a summary of the most important points at the start.

*See*—chapter 2, which shows some easy-to-use structures.

3—Make the average sentence length 15–20 words.

Long sentences are often hard work for readers, so the full stop should be the most common punctuation mark on the page. Your simplest way of raising readability is to cut average sentence length as far as you sensibly can below 20 words.

This is different from how many of us were taught to write at school or college, where the often meandering sentences of long-dead literary greats were highly regarded. But their readers were usually a well-educated minority with time on their hands, whereas today most of us are writing for busy people. Our documents may be at best a necessary nuisance in their hectic life. If we make them work too hard, they'll prefer to read something else.

Readers easily lose the thread of long sentences. And the more complex your topic, the shorter your sentences should ideally be. Then readers can apply their limited time and effort to understanding what you mean and acting on it.

Here's an example of a 79-word sentence, part of a shop's response to a complaint:

I am sorry to hear that the casing at the back of the pressure washer is broken, please be assured this is not the quality of products we aim to provide at John Lewis and I will certainly feed this back, as the item was delivered directly by our supplier I will have to pass this over to our supplier direct team for them to arrange a replacement with Karcher, they will call you back when this has been done. [Email, 2017]

This can easily be split into several sentences, removing some of the worst dross along the way, perhaps like this:

I'm sorry that the casing at the back of the pressure washer is broken. Please be assured this is not the kind of quality we aim to provide at John Lewis. As the item was delivered directly by our supplier, I'll pass this over to our supplier-direct

team, who will arrange a replacement with Karcher. The team will call you when this has been done.

Now, in four sentences, it makes sense at first reading.

See—chapter 3, which shows several ways of breaking up long sentences.

4—Use words your readers are likely to understand.

Among the tasks they were set in Channel 4's *Child Genius* series (2019), youngsters of 11 or 12 were given a definition and the first letter of a word of specified length and asked to identify it. Their correct (and astonishing) answers included *flagitious*, *fulgurous*, *phillumunist*, and *sciamachy*. Good for them! These were probably new words to most adult viewers, including me.

Yet the virtues of a rich vocabulary need to be tempered by restraint if we want to communicate with a wide audience, because long and unusual words are less likely to be understood than short and everyday ones. Obviously, though, some long words like *immediately* are common and easy, while some short ones like *recuse*, *redact*, and *resile* are rare and difficult.

In general, short and everyday words should be your first choice if you want to be understood by the many not the few. These words will reduce the readers' workload and help them get the meaning at first go. So always examine every word of three or more syllables in your own writing: is it really the best word for the job?

If you need to use technical terms and the readers may not know them, give an explanation in brackets, a breakout panel, or a glossary.

Here are some obvious edits that use shorter, simpler, and fewer words. Instead of:

Our tax team will track the enquiry and provide you with additional assistance should that be necessary.

—we could say:

Our tax team will track the enquiry and give you more help if needed.

Instead of:

We spend a lot of our shrinking financial envelope on estate that we don't utilise with sufficient effectiveness.

—we could say:

We spend a lot of our money on buildings we don't use effectively enough.

It's also good to use the right words. Here's a sentence from the website of Harewood House, Leeds:

With bright rhododendrons in bloom and stunning pink primulas towering above unfolding ferns, the gardens are a wonderful place to amerce yourself in and explore. [Accessed May 2016]

*Amerce* doesn't look right, does it? The word exists, but it's rare and means *to impose a fine*. Probably *immerse* was meant. Even highly paid columnists make mistakes like this. Here's Rod Liddle in the *Sunday Times*:

Increasingly, we live in a post-truth world where those who clamour loudest are indulged—even if this mitigates against finding some sort of relief for what is unquestionably a serious and miserable disorder. [17 March 2019]

But *mitigate* means *to make less severe*, so it doesn't work here. The author means *militate against*, which means *to exert influence on*, and is easily remembered from its similarity with *military*.

See—chapter 4, which gives a lexicon of simpler word choices; and chapter 13 on dealing with troublesome words.

5—Use only as many words as you need for meaning and tone of voice.

Every word should be worth its place on the page. If it's not helping to say something valuable or to get the tone of voice right, delete it. This is especially necessary on webpages, where busy readers are even less tolerant of dross than in a paper document.

Try to develop a good nose for padding, nonsense, and drivel because they all distract busy readers and waste their effort. Sometimes, we can just save a word or two, or we can be more radical by looking for the essence of what's being said and discarding all the rhubarb. This is what's needed in the next example, where phrases like *physical problem* and *put this right* are ripe for culling:

If you have suffered severe damage to your heart muscle, then you may have a physical problem such as a ruptured muscle which is preventing your heart from working in the right way. If this is the case then you should be considered for surgery to put this right within two days of your heart attack. [56 words, average sentence length (ASL) 28]

We could say this instead, using less than half the wordage:

If a heart attack has severely damaged your heart muscle, it may be ruptured and not working properly. So your doctor should consider surgery within two days. [27 words, ASL 13]

Even a short sentence may be flabbily expressed:

The infancy stage is where blockchain currently resides.

In almost half the words, we could write:

Blockchain is in its infancy.

See—chapter 5, which shows many ways of word saving.

6—Prefer active-voice verbs unless there's a good reason for using the passive.

Verbs are time-action words like *go*, *eat*, and *admit*. Perhaps nothing drains the life and interest from writing as much as the overuse of passive-voice verbs (explained below). Passives are certainly useful, and chapter 6 explains why. But if you habitually use them where active-voice verbs are feasible, you'll miss a good opportunity to make your work more human and personal.

In English-language conversations, the word order tends to be:

agent (or ‘doer’) + a verb in the active voice + an object.

So, at its simplest, we get:

Helen (agent) is playing (active-voice verb) the drums (object).

In the passive voice, this would be *The drums are being played by Helen*, in which Helen has moved to the end, the drums have moved to the start, and the meaning is the same. So it’s all fine, especially if you want the readers to focus on the drums, but it’s not the word order you’d usually hear in conversation. Anyone who spoke mainly in the passive voice would sound very odd.

A common problem with the passive is that the doers may go missing, so it gives constructions like *The drums are being played*, *Mistakes have been made*, and *The trees will be felled tomorrow*, from which responsibility and agency have vanished. This happens a lot in business and official documents, making reading more difficult than it needs to be. It may also sound formal, evasive, and defensive. Of course, sometimes the doers are irrelevant, but generally readers want to know who’s doing the action as it helps them picture events accurately. When passives are combined with long sentences and wordiness, reading difficulty multiplies.

See—chapters 6 and 7.

7—Use good verbs to express the actions in your sentences.

If a public speaker seems wooden and boring, you can amuse yourself by concentrating on their verbs (time-action words). Invariably, they will seem dull, stale, weedy, shrivelled, or otherwise unexpressive. They won’t sound as if they’ve been chosen with care, or to pique your interest or spark a reaction. In appendix 1, I’ve listed the 300 most common verbs, and they’re mainly short, simple, and expressive. If you have an interesting topic and use these verbs, you’ll have a strong chance of keeping the readers alert. There are hundreds of other verbs



in common use that can also help you sound clear and interesting—there's no need to search for rare ones.

An over-formal approach can obscure the clarity of the ideas behind simple verbs. Say you want to buy 400 sheep. Here are two simple ways of saying it:

- I want to buy 400 sheep.
- I'd like to purchase 400 sheep.

But in some business writing, these simple ideas become overdressed, for example:

- I am desirous of purchasing 400 sheep.
- The acquisition of 400 sheep by means of purchase is my objective.
- Undertaking the purchase of 400 sheep is desired by me.
- Buying 400 ovine mammalian ruminants is a procurement exercise whose undertaking I want to perform.

To write like that is to risk joining the Fog People. So a key part of a plain-English style is to use simple verbs in simple constructions.

*See*—chapter 7 and appendix 1.

## 8—Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.

Busy readers like well-constructed vertical lists because they're easy to scan and digest. For example, instead of writing this in a health leaflet:

You can try to self-manage your pain by using things like formal self-management programmes (group-based, individual or online), or informal self-management (for example, learning about pain management by reading about it or watching a video).

—we can write this:

You can try to cope with the pain by self-managing it:

- formally—using group-based, individual, or online programmes, or
- informally—for example, learning about pain management by reading about it or watching a video.

The first approach is good and clear but when we split the information into short, manageable chunks, we help readers focus better on the two main issues and then delve into the detail.

See—chapter 8 for tips, techniques, and examples.

9—Put your points positively when you can.

Negative expressions are often harder for readers to process, so it makes sense to say things positively when you can. Multiple negatives can be particularly difficult.

In 2016, the US state of Colorado held a referendum on various questions, including one about whether to abolish slavery from its constitution. Oddly, a form of slavery (as legally defined) was still permitted for prison inmates because they were expected to work for little or no money. The relevant question on the ballot paper asked this:

Shall there be an amendment to the Colorado constitution concerning the removal of the exception to the prohibition of slavery and involuntary servitude when used as a punishment for persons duly convicted of a crime?

What could go wrong in asking a legalistic question that included the negatively phrased expression *removal of the exception to the prohibition*?

It seems unlikely that voters really understood the question. Of 2.3 million ballots cast, there was a tiny majority for retaining slavery, which thus survived in Colorado law for two more years—provoking a national outcry—until voters, on being more fully informed, reversed their decision.

So we need to be careful about negatives, useful though they are. We can often replace them with positives without changing meaning or emphasis. For example, instead of using the annoyingly negative phrase *not without*, like this:

The risk-based approach is not without its own well-recognised disadvantages.

—we could simply write:

The risk-based approach has some well-known disadvantages.

See—chapter 9.

10—Put accurate punctuation at the heart of your writing.

A school inspector once criticized a master for teaching punctuation excessively, scoffing at his insistence that the subject was crucial. So the master wrote on the board: ‘The inspector said the teacher is an idiot.’ With a flourish, he then inserted two commas, to give: ‘The inspector, said the teacher, is an idiot.’ Thus he proved the importance of punctuation to the meaning of words.

Imagine a page without any punctuation marks or capitalization, and it’s soon clear why punctuation is essential. Quick, smooth, accurate reading is hard without it. ‘I love cooking my family and my dog’ is very different from ‘I love cooking, my family, and my dog.’

Don’t be afraid of punctuation: only about a dozen marks need to be mastered and the main rules are fairly simple. To whet your appetite, here’s an instance of one of the chief punctuation mistakes found in business emails and letters, though in this case it’s from the BBC website. Can you spot it?

Thai immigration officials told Reuters that Canada had ‘granted her asylum’, however Canadian officials told the BBC they currently have ‘nothing to confirm’ on the issue. [BBC website, 11 January 2019, regarding the Saudi woman Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun]

Yes, the comma after *asylum* is bad. This is where a new sentence should begin, so it needs a full stop (or semicolon) at that point.

In the following example, a pensions provider gets several of the commas wrong. Most of them are redundant or wrongly placed, causing the reader who has asked ‘Why did you send me this email?’ to stumble repeatedly:

You received our email last week, as part of our ongoing housekeeping, because as a pension provider, we have a responsibility to monitor contributions and report to The Pensions Regulator, if we find they don’t meet the expected contribution levels. I have checked your worker group, and it meets the minimum requirement, as you have checked that the contributions being deducted from your payroll, meet the minimum requirements, we will update our database to reflect this.

The poor punctuation—if nothing else—is easy to rectify. To show this, I've bracketed the deletions I would make and bolded the insertions:

You received our email last week[,] as part of our ongoing housekeeping[,] because, as a pension provider, we have a responsibility to monitor contributions and report to The Pensions Regulator[,] if we find they don't meet the expected contribution levels. I have checked your worker group, and it meets the minimum requirement[, as]. **As** you have checked that the contributions being deducted from your payroll[,] meet the minimum requirements, we will update our database to reflect this.

*See*—chapter 10 for a summary of the main punctuation conventions.

11—Use good grammar, but relax—you don't need to know hundreds of grammatical terms.

In Monty Python's comedy film *The Life of Brian* (1979), Brian mounts a night-time protest against the Latin-speaking forces occupying ancient Judaea by daubing the slogan *Romanes eunt domus* in a prominent place. He's caught by a Roman centurion, who improves his bad grammar at sword-point and orders him to write out the correct version, *Romani ite domum* (Romans go home), a hundred times. By daybreak, Brian's red-paint handiwork has covered a vast wall, boosting his status among the oppressed locals.

This is the trouble with grammar: people get upset and draw their weapons when it's wrong, and they even get upset when they think it's wrong but it isn't. For example, some folk still believe it's bad grammar to start a sentence with *But*, *Because*, and *So*, just because their teachers said this many years ago. It isn't bad grammar and never has been, as chapter 17 explains. This helps us write plain English because, when necessary, we can split an overlong sentence and restart with one of these short and useful connecting words.

Grammar is the body of conventions by which words are grouped in a way that's meaningful to readers. Plain English tends to follow the conventions of standard English because that's the main common language people understand and expect from public bodies,

broadcasters, and print journalists. Of course, in the UK and other English-speaking countries, many varieties of English exist—just as there were variations in the Latin used by soldiers serving on Hadrian's Wall as against those who were subduing the rebellious Judaeans.

Having an eye (and, more important, an ear) for sound grammar can help you express yourself well in plain English. Just a couple of examples will show that rectifying poor grammar can be fairly easy. First, this from the resignation letter of British government minister Tracey Crouch:

Unfortunately, implementation of these changes are now being delayed until October 2019. [Letter to prime minister, 1 November 2018]

Because *implementation* is singular, it doesn't agree with *are*, so the grammar is broken. The author needs *is*. It's an easy mistake to make because *changes*, which is plural, lies seductively between the noun and its verb.

Second, this from a website about Staithes on the Yorkshire coast:

Iron Age remains have been found in Roxby Beck close to the town, whether Iron Age peoples were attracted here for the fish or the Iron Stone remains to be discovered or perhaps they were after the Jet deposits or all of it. [Accessed 11 June 2016]

This has several trouble-spots—did you notice them? (1) After *town*, we need a full stop because a new sentence should start there. (2) Types of rock like *ironstone* and *jet* don't take an initial capital. (3) The phrase *remains to be discovered* looks at first to be ambiguous as it could mean 'this knowledge has not yet been ascertained' or 'the incomers were attracted by ironstone remains that had not yet been discovered' (which, of course, is impossible). (4) The phrase *all of it* should say *all of them* as several things have been mentioned.

See—chapters 11 and 12, but do feel free to read the rest of the book first if you find explanations like the above too nit-picking. There's some good news, too—you can be an excellent writer without knowing much about grammar.

12—Check your material before the readers do.

Having planned, drafted and perhaps redrafted a document or webpage, you need to check it carefully before sending or publishing it. This is the vital skill of proofreading. If errors get through, they'll make the work look careless and they'll sometimes be laughable, offensive, or even give the opposite of the intended meaning. For low-literacy readers, errors may further reduce their understanding because they may not imagine the authors could have made a mistake.

Most of us have to be our own proofreaders, and it's hard not to miss a few errors especially if we're checking on screen. But if, say, you're a teacher writing to parents, do take extra care. When a Dundee primary school sent parents a seventeen-clause contract to sign before their children would be allowed to play football at break-times—yes, that really did happen—it included four errors:

- I will not deliberate foul tackle. [read *deliberately*]
- I will not hogg the ball. [read *hog*]
- I will demonstrate sportsmanlike conduct and apologising. [read *apologise* or *apologize*, but who knows for what?]
- I will use timeouts for myself as individual players if needed. [For *as*, read *and* (though the meaning remains obscure)] (*Daily Mail*, 14 May 2016)

Proofreading is different from skim-reading for information. So try to stay focused and go steadily: one slow read for headings and layout, and at least one more slow read for sense, spelling, and punctuation.

See—chapter 12 for tips and techniques.



# Planning comes first

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**GUIDELINE** *Plan before you write.*

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We may all think of writing as a creative activity, and so it is. But if you're preparing something that's designed to inform or instruct, then creativity is only a small part of the story. Most of your effort will go towards finding and assembling evidence, facts, and opinions, then offering clearly stated ideas, decisions, and recommendations based on them. It helps to use a simple, easily remembered method. As the book unfolds, you'll see that much of what you can do in pursuit of clarity fits into the following five steps of just such a method:

- 1 **Purpose**—you need to be clear why you're writing, and focus on the readers' needs.
- 2 **Content**—you need to gather the information you're going to write about, and set it down in a plan.
- 3 **Structure**—you need to decide how you're going to group, separate, sequence, and display the information, which will create order from chaos and help busy readers find what matters most to them.
- 4 **Style**—you need to use words and sentences that are likely to be readily understood by your intended readers. For this purpose, 'style' also covers punctuation and grammar.
- 5 **Revision Of Everything**—you need to revise your work as often as time and energy allow, because this helps you polish and fine-tune it for quality and remove mistakes.

You can see bold type on some of the characters in that list, because they form a mnemonic (memory aid). Like most mnemonics, this



one's a bit contrived but is easy to recall and says what it's about. The word is **PROCESS**—**p**urpose, **c**ontent, **s**tructure, **s**tyl**e**, and **r**evision **o**f **e**verything, which are the five interlocking steps of the **PROCESS** method. They'll help you organize, link, and set down what you want to say, which in turn will help you generate and sustain interest.

You'll also need to adopt an attitude that fits well with expository writing (as against creative writing). The former *Wall Street Journal* author Philip Yaffe puts it like this: 'No one wants to read what you are going to write. First and foremost, you must give them reasons for doing so.' In other words, you have to arrange and write your stuff in a way that persuades reluctant readers to sample and then devour the tasty morsels you lay in front of them.

### Getting started with a plan

'I don't know how to start' is a common complaint. Many authors reckon the best way to start is not to write but to plan. The first stage of planning is to think out:

- who's going to read the document
- what they expect to get from it
- in what circumstances they'll be reading it (at leisure; at work in an office, factory, or building site; on a website or smartphone)
- what you're trying to achieve.

It's better to plan on paper or on screen than in your head because it's easier to marshal ideas when they're written down. It's difficult to hold twenty points in your head while simultaneously assessing them for strength and relevance, and grouping the related ones. For one thing, you're having to assess which of the two million billion possible ways of ranking the points is best—that really is the number of possible permutations.

For a short document, keep the plan simple. Make a list or bubble diagram of all the points you expect to make, *in no particular order*. (The illustration shows a bubble diagram of my first thoughts for



Simple plan: a bubble diagram

writing chapter 30.) Cross out any irrelevant points. Link the rest into groups of related points. Rank them in sequence, perhaps using one of the structures in chapter 2. Then you'll have a good framework from which to write. This kind of plan may take only a few minutes. However long it takes, you're almost guaranteed to recover the time when you write.

### Creating a core statement and horizontal document plan

Longer documents benefit from more planning. Say your manager asks you to write a report, discuss exactly what's wanted so you're clear on the purpose and the amount of detail expected—otherwise you'll waste time on rewrites. If your manager doesn't know, investigate the topic and return with a **core statement** that sets out what you regard as the document's purpose.

A core statement says what you'll cover in the main section of the document—normally the discussion section. It helps you focus on the task and the audience. Sharpening your focus like this will save you researching topics you don't need to cover. The core statement also builds your confidence as it provides your first glimpse of the finishing line. It's a rigidly constructed sentence in seven segments, as shown next. The obliques separate alternative words and phrases you might use:

Core segments	Typical phrases
1 Type of document	This report/paper
2 Your readers	to the head of the legal department
3 Verb	describes/assesses/explains/ analyses/evaluates/considers/ investigates
4 Topic	possible improvements to the clarity of our insurance policies
5 Linking phrase	in terms of/with reference to/under
6 Number of sections	six main lines of enquiry
7 Main headings	– benefits and dangers – what documents we would need to rewrite – implications for staff training – other companies' experience – how to comply with consumer- rights regulations – costs—internal and external

Don't expect to write the core statement in a few seconds. You may need several goes at choosing the best verb in segment 3. Discuss the core statement with your manager, apply any changes they want, and

get them to sign it off. This reduces the chance of creating a report they didn't ask for or expect.

The core statement underlies the next stage of planning—the **horizontal document plan**. Regard this as a series of related boxes into which you slot all the points you expect to make under the headings set by the core statement. The main practical points are as follows:

- Use a big sheet of paper (prefer A3 to A4).
- Rotate the page so that the longer edge is nearer to you (landscape).
- Put your headings along the top.
- Jot down all the points you can think of under each heading. Usually you'll want to create a system of subheadings in each section: boxes nested in boxes.

Let's assume the core statement said:

This report to the head of the legal department describes possible improvements to the clarity of our insurance policies under six main lines of enquiry: benefits and dangers; what documents we'd need to rewrite; implications for staff training; other companies' experience; how to comply with the consumer-rights regulations; costs—internal and external.

A much-simplified (and tidied up) horizontal document plan for two sections of the report might look like this:

<u>benefits and dangers</u>	<u>complications for staff training</u>
<p><u>benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focus for an advertising + sales campaign</li> <li>• Get in line with marketplace - customer satisfaction</li> <li>• Clear English Standard</li> <li>• Compliance with EU directive</li> </ul> <p><u>Dangers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal safety - consult lawyers, counsel</li> <li>• Confusion among existing customers?</li> </ul>	<p><u>Direct sales staff</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No new training required - in effect same policies.</li> <li>• Explain purpose and discuss likely customer responses.</li> <li>• New selling points (clear, simple, easy to use).</li> </ul> <p><u>Head Office staff</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Briefing on new features for all in direct customer contact.</li> <li>• Explain philosophy.</li> </ul>

You can then assess the points for strength and relevance and, if necessary, group them under further subheadings. Gaps in your knowledge may be revealed; you may need to fill them before proceeding. Next, put the headings and points in order, perhaps using one of the structures in chapter 2. Show a tidy version of the plan to your manager and discuss it with them. Get it signed off.

The writing itself can now begin, perhaps simply by expanding some of the points on the plan. As you write the first draft, you'll probably change your mind about the order of points, and add things to the plan. This is fine—it's meant to be a working document.

When you start writing, there's no need to begin at the beginning. Why not start with the parts you're confident about and know best? If you do this, you'll quickly see some progress, which will make you less anxious about tackling the rest. Writing long documents can be wearisome and depressing, so some early success is good for morale.

If you're part of a team, they can jointly prepare the core statement and horizontal document plan, using a whiteboard or similar. Having a common purpose and plan, each person will write their individual sections with a better awareness of how it fits in.

### Alternative approaches to planning

Writers I've worked with seem to perform better when they plan. They also *believe* they write better and more quickly. But not everyone is happy to plan to the same extent: there are different approaches, all with their followers. For convenience, we can use four main labels to represent these approaches: architects, watercolourists, oil painters, and bricklayers. You may like to consider which group you fit into. Most writers fit into two or more of the groups from time to time.

- **Architects** tend to take a three-stage approach to writing: planning, writing, and revising. They don't try to perfect the writing as they create the first draft. They prefer to leave a draft and come back to it later, revising thoroughly on paper or on screen.
- **Watercolourists** try to produce a complete version rapidly at the first attempt, with little revision. There may have been little planning on paper

but long mental incubation. Some literary writers are thought to favour this, believing it keeps their writing spontaneous and true to feeling. Jack Kerouac said in 1951 that he wrote his famous novel of the beat generation, *On the Road*, at 6,500 words a day using a typewriter with a single roll of paper (120ft, or 40m, long) and making few corrections. His then girlfriend has given conflicting accounts of his approach, first agreeing that he completed the book in a 14-day stretch but more recently suggesting he spent years revising his work, carefully crafting each paragraph like a poem. So perhaps he was a closet architect after all.

- **Oil painters** tend to jot down ideas and then organize and repeatedly rework them. There's little planning on paper. Rewriting seems to help oil painters find out what they think, rather than helping them focus on the readers' needs.
- **Bricklayers** tend to polish every sentence before going on to the next, in a careful process of building block by block. This means they revise very little once they've prepared a first draft. Bricklayers tend to plan and have a clear idea of what they want to say from the outset. They tend not to regard writing as an aid to thinking.

Given the importance of careful thought about the readers' needs when preparing plain-English documents, the architectural approach, with its bias towards planning, seems to be the most suitable. Again, though, you should be ready to experiment, use different strategies for different tasks, and do whatever will get the writing job completed to a satisfactory standard with the minimum of effort. Find out what works best for you.

If you can't see yourself in any of the above groups, here's another way of looking at it, based on the ideas of Dr Betty Sue Flowers, once a University of Texas professor. Her model separates writing into four stages, each requiring the writer to take a different approach and assume four different personalities. They are described thus by the Australian plain-language practitioner Christopher Balmford:

- **The madman** who brainstorms, takes notes, and is enthusiastic, experimental, and above all creative.
- **The architect** who reviews the information that the madman has created and gathered, and uses it to develop an outline of the document.

- **The carpenter** who fleshes out the structure by writing the text and producing the first (however many) drafts.
- **The judge** who edits and reviews [the] drafts.

All the personalities are vital to the writing process, but the architect has the key job of dividing, classifying, and sequencing the information.

Strategic planning: learning from readers

A strategic plan may be necessary, especially when preparing a major document for internal or public use. The plan below is about preparing a booklet for staff who are being invited to join a company pension scheme, but many of its points are universal. The plan builds in plenty of reader involvement—essential unless secrecy, deadlines, or costs prevent it.

### *Pre-production stage*

- Decide the purpose. Why is the booklet needed? Would something else—like a video or webpage—be better or more cost-effective?
- Determine the content. At this stage, just outline main points.
- Define the audience. Consult staff to see what they expect from the booklet. Discuss the outline. If possible, get an idea of how they'd like the information organized and even what they'd like it to say.
- Consider how the booklet fits into the system. How will it be distributed, used, stored? Will it be downloadable from your website? How will it be amended in future and by whom? What organizational politics will need to be dealt with and how?

### *Production stage*

- Fill in the outline of the content. Decide what structure is most suitable.
- Write the draft. Include headings and subheadings but don't worry about adding too many layout features at this stage. Make the headings informative, not labels.
- Evaluate the draft with staff—include some who haven't yet been consulted. Use a questionnaire to test comprehension. Iron out problems by redrafting and restructuring.
- Consider using an external editor to clarify the text and to make its grammar and punctuation more consistent.

- Prepare a good layout. Hiring a well-qualified design professional may help make the document more usable, legible, and appetizing. Diagrams and cartoons may help. Evaluate the layout with staff.
- Consider using an external proofreader and, for long documents, an external indexer.
- Give the booklet a reference number and date.

### *Post-production stage*

- Final evaluation: after distribution, use a survey and face-to-face discussions to gauge reactions. Did the booklet do its job?
- Keep it up to date by regular reviews.

### Finally

Authors sometimes think they're too busy to plan their writing, but the whole point of planning is to save you time and stress. Also, if you're preparing a document for someone else, creating a core statement and horizontal plan and getting them agreed will lessen the need for soul-destroying rewrites. For once, we need a cliché: 'Failing to plan is planning to fail.'



# 2

## Organizing your material in a reader-centred structure

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**GUIDELINE** *Organize your material so readers can see the important information early and navigate the document easily.*

---

You might be lucky: your readers might regard your document as the highlight of their day. They might give it the time you think it deserves, browsing through it contentedly for hours.

Or they might be like most other readers. Your document will be an interruption. They'll skim it in haste, scribbling remarks and noting important bits with a highlighter. And they'll be asking two questions about everything they read: 'So what?' and 'How does this affect me?'

Answering these questions in a clear style won't always be enough. You'll also need to organize the material so readers can quickly extract what they want. This will increase the likelihood of getting your ideas read—the first step in getting them accepted. And a crucial way of organizing material well is to **put the big news early**. Then readers can quickly see what you're getting at. This is particularly important on webpages, where limited screen space means the top half of the page is the most likely to be read (see chapter 27).

Think about using other ways of making your document more tasty. You could plunder these much-used journalistic tactics, which lure readers into sampling a story by making it seem more appealing:

- A box showing 'the story so far'—a quick burst of background facts.
- A timeline of significant events.

- A table of pros and cons on an issue, so readers can compare points of view.
- A bio box giving fast facts about leading characters in the story.
- A tips box—advice on how best to perform an action or task.
- A glossary box to explain any technical terms.

This chapter shows ten ways of organizing your information. Don't feel that you have to force your writing to fit these models or, where I suggest headings, that you have to use my exact words. Quarry the models for ideas that will suit your own way of doing things.

Model 1: Top-heavy triangle ('news triangle')

Put your most important point first, follow it with the next most important, and so on, until your last paragraph includes relatively minor points. You may need to do a bit of scene-setting to start with—use the first sentence or the heading for this:

<b>John</b>	
<b>Request for leave from 25 March–12 April</b>	
<b>Scene-setting</b>	Thanks for your email yesterday.
<b>Big news</b>	The director has agreed to your request to take special unpaid leave immediately after your visit to Athens. It's vital, though, that we have a brief written report of your key findings as soon as the business part of the trip is completed. Will you please get this to us on 24 March.
<b>Less important</b>	Please liaise with Michael South about rearranging the return flight.
<b>Minor points</b>	We can speak again after Tuesday's meeting.

Even negative news should usually be delivered early unless this will clearly be upsetting. You may need to soften it, of course:

**John**

<b>Request for leave from 25 March–12 April</b>	
<b>Scene-setting</b>	Thanks for your email yesterday.
<b>Big news</b>	The director considered your request carefully but I'm sorry to tell you he has had to say no. He feels the launch of the new product at the end of March really demands your presence here.
<b>Minor points</b>	I realize you'll be disappointed but perhaps we can have a chat after next Tuesday's meeting.

One reason for saving big news till the end is the deliberate obfuscation sometimes seen in tactical writing—particularly in legal-dispute correspondence—when delay will increase surprise, raise tension, or leave the reader with a sense of threat.

If a letter has to give bad or shocking news, it is considerate and tactful not to announce it stridently in the heading and first paragraph. Though clarity remains important, a gentle and diplomatic lead-in will help soften the message.

The top-heavy triangle is useful when you're asking for something your readers may be reluctant to give. The letter below is trying to get local traders to fill in a questionnaire. But where does this vital information come?

Dear Mr Jones

Our Sea Fishery Group is conducting studies to aid the development of a local Fishery Forum. The idea of a Fishery Forum is to promote the fishing industry of the north west and to stress the importance of a regional approach.

The study is designed to help evaluate the monetary impact that fish landings from the north-west fishing fleet have on the region as a whole. Also the study will assess the feasibility of placing a logo on local fish products so that their origins can be instantly recognized.

To gather information for the study, a questionnaire has been designed. We hope a high proportion of these forms will be completed and returned so that the final analysis will be as detailed as possible.

All answers to the questionnaires will be confidential and only the combined figures for the whole region will be published.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could complete the enclosed questionnaire by 15 June and return it to me. If you have any queries about the study or the questionnaire, please contact me on the above number. Thank you for your help.

Yes, the readers only learn the main action point **in the final paragraph**, and they may never get there. It would have been better to begin with an explanatory heading and the plea for help in bold type.

Dear Mr Jones

**Improving the prosperity of the north west: your help is needed**

I'm writing to ask for your help with a venture that will improve the prosperity of our region and of every trader who does business here.

Our Sea Fishery Group is conducting research into setting up a Fishery Forum that would promote our local fishing industry.

**As part of the research, I need your help. Would you please complete the enclosed questionnaire** and return it to me by 15 June? [etc.]

**Other ways of helping readers to focus**

In letters or emails that deal with several issues, it's worth using a heading for each. The heading can be placed between paragraphs or form the first few words of the paragraph, in bold or italics. You can then use the top-heavy triangle when arranging the points in each headed section. When replying to long and perhaps rambling complaints, ombudsmen and regulators often begin, 'From your letter, I understand your main complaints are...', followed by a bullet list. This sets out the issues to be dealt with and enables the complainant to object if they have been wrongly summarized.

Model 2: Problem-cause-solution

This is a simple model for short letters, emails and reports. First you state the problem:

You asked me to find out how a batch of chocolate came to be contaminated during the night shift on 25 April.

Then you state the cause:

What seems to have happened is that some inadequately treated reclaimed chocolate was added to the mix. This occurred because the reclaimed chocolate was mislabelled and stored in the wrong part of the factory.

Then you say what should happen in the future:

The contaminated batch will have to be destroyed. The loss will cost £2,800, taking everything into account. I have told supervisors to tighten their procedures for labelling and storage. They'll report back to me next week.

### Model 3: Chronological order

This simply follows the time sequence of a series of actions or events, which can be paragraphed, numbered, or dated depending on the purpose.

### Model 4: Questions and answers

Questions and answers help to break the information into chunks. Here's an excellent example written in everyday English:

#### **How do I make a complaint about the council's services?**

If you have a complaint, please raise it first with the department that deals with the subject of your complaint. Contact them and try to get the problem settled there and then. Phone numbers of departments are shown at the end of the leaflet.

#### **What if I'm still not satisfied?**

If you're not satisfied or your complaint is complicated, please set out all the facts clearly by making a formal complaint in writing. You can do this on the pull-out form opposite or through our website. If you need help to complete the form, please ask at any council office. We'll acknowledge your complaint and keep you informed at every stage.

### Where else can I get help?

If you're not satisfied with the way your complaint is dealt with, you could contact one of your ward councillors. A list is available at all our reception desks, on our website, and from Member Services (telephone: Cadeby 4000).

Questions tend to provoke interest in readers by bringing them into the action. It's customary to reiterate at least part of the question when answering it. So the answer to *What if I'm not satisfied?* might begin *If you're not satisfied*. This may be tedious but seems to help the readers. There's no harm in occasionally giving a short answer where it would be boring to repeat the question. So if the question were *Can I claim this benefit even if I live alone?*, the answer might be *Yes*.

Questions are particularly useful if they include personal words. Compare *Where can more information be obtained?* with *Where can I get more information?*

Questions also convert dull, plodding label headings into verb-rich information. Compare this heading from a public leaflet, which wouldn't be out of place in a scientific paper:

Frequency of use by paramedics of aspirin in the treatment of heart-attack victims

—with the much simpler question it could have been:

How often do paramedics use aspirin to treat heart-attack victims?

—or, in the passive to put the stress on *aspirin*:

How often is aspirin used by paramedics to treat heart-attack victims?

Model 5: S-C-R-A-P (Situation, Complication, Resolution, Action, Politeness)

A corny mnemonic, but useful. An email using this structure might say:

**Dear Ms Soaring**

<b>Order for 5 Sky-Fly paragliders</b>	
<b>Situation</b>	Thanks for your order of 17 December.
<b>Complication</b>	The manufacturers have recently withdrawn the Sky-Fly and now offer a much-improved model, the Sky Jet. I attach a leaflet that gives details of all its features.
<b>Resolution</b>	Although the price of the Sky Jet is £150 more than the old model, I can offer it to you at a special introductory price of £1 300 until 10 January next. We could let you have immediate delivery.
<b>Action</b>	If you'd like to order the new model at the discount price, do please contact us. We accept payment by all major credit cards. You can also buy online from our e-shop (quote offer XSJ).
<b>Politeness</b>	I look forward to hearing from you.

Model 6: S-O-A-P (Situation, Objective, Appraisal, Proposal)

Here's a much-simplified short report that uses SOAP:

**FALL IN SALES OF RABBIT CHOCOLATE BARS****Situation**

- In the last three months, Rabbit has lost about 10 per cent of its share in the aphrodisiac chocolate bar market.

**Objective**

- To regain and improve market share in the next six months.

**Appraisal**

- The impact of our initial advertising and promotional burst has petered out. Research shows the recent price increase didn't affect sales very much but Rabbit has started losing ground to similar-priced competitors like

the Hunky bar and the Rhino bar: people are seeing them as more sophisticated products.

### **Proposal**

- Target the higher social groups with a more sophisticated campaign based on Beatrix Potter stereotypes, including special-offer weekends in Brer Rabbit country.

### Model 7: PARbox emails

Some firms, infuriated by the time-wasting woolliness of inter-office emails, insist that all begin with three standard lines for **Purpose**, **Action**, and **Response**:

#### **Purpose**

To explain developments in the Savill fraud case

#### **Action requested**

Your help in unearthing missing documents

#### **Response required**

By 10 January

Readers can quickly scan the key facts and fit the request into their schedule. The box is followed by a main heading and text as normal.

### Model 8: The 5 P's (Position, Problem, Possibilities, Proposal, Packaging)

Using these headings, a short and very simplified report for a sports club might say:

#### UPDATE ON OUR LEAGUE PLACING

##### **1 Position**

- 1.1 With only 10 games to go this season, the team is close to the relegation zone.



- 1.2 The coach's contract has two years to run at £70K a year. He is widely respected in the town and throughout the sport.

## 2 Problem

- 2.1 Recent results have been very bad—9 defeats and 2 draws in the last 11 games. Attendances are down 10 per cent on last season's and our overdraft stands at £3m. The fans are restless and some have started barracking the coach.

## 3 Possibilities

- 3.1 We could buy new players before the transfer deadline—the coach's proposals are attached.
- 3.2 We could terminate the coach's contract immediately but this would be costly and very unpopular with most of the fans. It could also damage team morale.
- 3.2 We could leave things as they are.

## 4 Proposal

- 4.1 We should try to buy Player A to improve the defence. Apart from that, we should leave things as they are because:
  - (a) there's little cash for new players or buying out the coach's contract
  - (b) two key players will soon return from injury
  - (c) the team has played better recently and the last two defeats were very narrow.

## 5 Packaging

- 5.1 It may be a cliché, but we need to express full confidence in the players and the coach and say they'd benefit from the continued support of the fans. We need to explain the club's financial position better. We need to reassure supporters their views will continue to be considered.

In the report, I've given a commonly used system of paragraph numbering. The aim is to help readers navigate and, if necessary, comment on it more easily. An alternative to a decimal system is simply to number paragraphs in 1–2–3 order. In either system, if you use a second level of heading, you don't need to number it but you should distinguish it by layout, perhaps with bold type or underlining.

Avoid the complications of a third or fourth level of decimals (3.1.2 etc.) unless the amount of detail really demands it.

### Model 9: Correspondent's order

It's possible to respond to some letters or emails using the same order of points as your correspondent. Normally it's wise to say this is what you're doing: 'I'd like to respond to your points in the same order that you made them.'

### Model 10: Full-dress report

A good arrangement for a detailed administrative or technical report or consultation paper is given below. Notice that the summary is placed early, though it may be written late in the process. A scientific report would also have sections for 'method' and 'results', which would follow the introduction; it may also have an abstract—a kind of condensed summary that can be included in a database of abstracts along with key words and phrases that people will search for.

#### *Title*

The title says what the topic is, briefly but not too cryptically. If necessary, add a longer subtitle. Also add the author's name, the date, and the distribution list.

#### *Contents list*

If included, a contents list deserves a page of its own. Its headings should replicate those in the body of the report, making them easy to find.

#### *Summary*

The summary gives the report's most interesting must-read points in bite-size chunks. It should briefly set out the purpose, main findings, main conclusions, and main recommendations. It's designed to give an accurate and rapid understanding of the main issues, enabling busy readers to ignore the rest if they wish. Therefore, any main conclusion or recommendation that is qualified elsewhere in the report should also be qualified in the summary. A summary may contain

subheadings, which should differ from any other main headings in the report.

The summary should mainly be composed of informative, not descriptive statements: *Five staff should be transferred to Section X*, not *A recommendation is made about transferring staff*.

Remember that everyone who sees the report will read the summary, whereas perhaps only 30 per cent will read the full report—so allow proper time to prepare it well. Almost always, the summary should come early. But in a short report (say, two or three pages), it can come after the conclusions and recommendations or (rarely) be omitted altogether.

If you've written the report well, the summary should be easy to do because it is mainly a cut-and-paste job, using text from the rest of the report but made more concise.

The summary's position, substance, and brevity make it the most important part of the report. In a long document, you could summarize the big news of each section at the start of the section. Then the readers will know whether to bother reading the rest of the section. You can then stitch together and condense your section summaries to form the overall document summary.

If most readers are unlikely to want the full report, circulate only the summary with the title and distribution list attached. People can then call for the full report if they wish.

### *Introduction*

The introduction describes the purpose, the background, how the work was done, and what it cost. It may include brief, simple acknowledgements. Resist the temptation to include conclusions and recommendations here.

### *Discussion*

The heading *Discussion* need not appear if a more specific alternative is available. This section sets out your results, findings, arguments, options, and ideas, preferably under heads and subheads so that people

can easily find their way and skim-read. It's likely to be the longest section. See chapter 1 for how to plan it.

### *Conclusions*

Conclusions are the inferences you draw from the discussion. They're not the same as 'concluding remarks' (which are usually unnecessary and can be omitted), so there's no need to put them at the end. It may be convenient to include them in the discussion itself, while saying or showing clearly that each is a conclusion. Repeating them in a separate section may help the reader, though, especially in a long report. Show where they came from.

### *Recommendations*

Your recommendations are what you think should be done, on the basis of the conclusions. Again, it may be convenient to include them in the discussion, and again you'll need to make clear they are your recommendations. To clarify their status, recommendations normally include *should* or *should be*. They may be numbered or bulleted.

### *Appendices*

Any appendices provide a home for fine detail that readers won't need in order to follow the discussion. Omit them altogether if you can.

### Finally

Your writing will rarely be the most important thing in your busy readers' lives. So your main aim is to help them achieve their objectives in studying your work. Stated bluntly, these are to Get In, Get On, and Get Out—in other words, to access the information readily, progress through it quickly, and stop as soon as possible. Lucid language and structure will help them do so, which can only be good for your reputation as a clear thinker.

# 3

## Writing short sentences and clear paragraphs

---

**GUIDELINE** *Over the whole document, make the average sentence length 15–20 words.*

---

Readers recoil when they see a long sentence slithering across the page like a snake. Here's a 65-word sidewinder from a consultation document about improving an inner-city area:

While low demand for housing has resulted in demolition of dwellings that has blighted the Hayden Riverside area, a far greater impact on population has occurred as a result of houses becoming empty or under-occupied and, when combined with the relatively low spending power of the residents of the area, this has had a drastic effect on local services, for example retail outlets and transportation.

At one level, the sentence is easy to read—most of the words and ideas are reasonably simple. What makes it hard work is that too many points are being made at once and they compete for attention.

Unless long sentences are simply constructed—set out as a list, say—they can cause confusion because they demand so much effort and short-term memory. So it's best to make one main point—and perhaps one subsidiary point—per sentence. Doing this might have led the example's author to split the text into three chunks (totalling only 48 words), as follows:

Few people want to live at Hayden Riverside, so the area has been blighted by demolition. The population has dropped even further because houses have

become empty or under-occupied. These problems—and the low spending power of the area's residents—have badly hit services like shops and transport.

What length of sentence is too long? Ignore advice that prescribes an upper limit, though if you regularly exceed 40 words, you'll certainly weary and deter your readers. Better to aim for an average of 15–20 words throughout. The key word is *average*, so not all sentences need to be in this range; there should be plenty of variety. Sentences of just a few words can add punch, though too many of them in succession will make your writing staccato. There's no lower limit on sentence length: a sentence can be just one word, such as *Why?*, or two words, such as *I disagree* or *Not so*. Such mini-sentences can also help your writing seem poised and confident.

One reason for keeping to a 15–20 word average is that people are used to it. In the mid-1960s, the researchers Kucera and Francis analysed a million words of published US writing and found the average sentence length was 19. Here are the scores for particular types of document: miscellaneous government (25 words); learned and scientific (24); press reports (21); humour (18); fictional romance/love (14); fictional science/detective (13). It's notable that government documents, perhaps the only material that could be classed as essential information, had the highest score. Nowadays, the average sentence length of editorials in 'quality' British newspapers like *The Times* rarely exceeds 20. Their authors know that busy readers can't be bothered to concentrate on the discursive, multi-clause sentences that were once so common in literary works and the press.

Coming up are several ways of clarifying long sentences: split and disconnect; split and connect; say less; use a list; cut verbiage; and start afresh.

### Split and disconnect

Full stops enable readers to digest your latest point and prepare for the next. This sentence from a local government report makes good sense but, at 58 words, is too long for busy people to grasp at first reading:

I understand that some doctors making night calls have been attacked in recent months on the expectation that they were carrying drugs and their caution when visiting certain areas in the south of the city has been very exacting and has even included telephoning the address to be visited from their car when they arrive outside the house.

Look for the main break in the sense. It comes in the second line after *drugs*. So you could split it there, delete *and*, insert another break after *exacting*, and produce this:

I understand that some doctors making night calls have been attacked in recent months on the expectation that they were carrying drugs. Their caution when visiting certain areas in the south of the city has been very exacting. It has even included telephoning the address to be visited from their car when they arrive outside the house.

Now the paragraph can be readily grasped at first reading, but you could still express the ideas more smoothly with an average sentence length of only 15 and without the unusual word *exacting*:

Recently, some doctors making night calls have been attacked because they were thought to be carrying drugs. So they have started taking strict precautions when visiting the south of the city. These have even included phoning the patient's home from their car on arrival.

### Split and connect

This means putting in a full stop and restarting the sentence with a term like *Additionally*, *Also*, *Alternatively*, *And*, *As a result*, *Because*, *But*, *Consequently*, *Despite this*, *Even so*, *Further*, *Furthermore*, *Indeed*, *In other words*, *In the next few days*, *Moreover*, *Nevertheless*, *Now*, *Or*, *Otherwise*, *So*, *Therefore*, *Today*, *Yet*, or *What's more*. The technique helps in this example from a lawyer's letter:

Whilst it is expected by the donor's family that the present arrangement for caring for the donor will continue for the rest of her life, should it at any stage become necessary to transfer the donor once more into a nursing institution, the donor's family envisages that the second-floor flat will be sold and the donor's share in the proceeds used to provide any additional income necessary to ensure her continued well-being.

That's a 73-word sentence—about four times my recommended average—and certainly a candidate for splitting. The obvious break point is after *life* in the second line:

Whilst it is expected by the donor's family that the present arrangement for caring for the donor will continue for the rest of her life.

But this fails because the sentence is unfinished—nothing complete has yet been said. Striking out *Whilst*, however, creates a complete sentence and the next can begin with *But* (see chapter 17 if this worries you):

~~Whilst~~ it is expected by the donor's family that the present arrangement for caring for the donor will continue for the rest of her life. But should it at any stage become necessary to transfer the donor once more into a nursing institution, the donor's family envisages that the second-floor flat will be sold and the donor's share in the proceeds used to provide any additional income necessary to ensure her continued well-being.

Other improvements are possible. At the start, it would be simpler to say *The donor's family expects*. The second sentence could end at *sold*, and a new sentence could begin *The donor's share in the proceeds would then be used*. The word *institution* could become *home* and so on. These changes would give an average sentence length of about 24 words.

Often, sentences that start with *While* and *Although* go on far too long. By omitting the first word and taking the approach above, you can form two much-shorter sentences.

Say less

Sometimes a sentence includes needless repetition, as at the start of this lawyer's letter:

Trial of John Smith and James Jackson

Trade Descriptions Act 1968, Crown Court, 10.30 am, Tuesday 7 June

The above defendants are to be tried at the Crown Court on Tuesday 7 June at 10.30 am for several offences under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 concerning the supply of motor vehicles to which they had applied false trade descriptions.



The first sentence repeats most of the heading. So 17 words would be saved if it said:

The above defendants are to be tried for several offences concerning the supply of motor vehicles to which they had applied false trade descriptions.

As you edit and polish, always stay alert for opportunities to remove redundant words.

### Use a list

Vertical lists break long sentences into more visual chunks, as you'll also see in chapter 8, and they are particularly useful when describing a procedure. Take this safety message about checking a hospital incubator:

The attachment of the warmer support-bearing assembly system must be checked to ensure that it is adequately lubricated, its securing screws are tight and that the warmer head can be easily repositioned without the support bearing sticking.

Though it's 37 words long this is not a hard sentence, but staff will grasp it more quickly if it's split into a vertical list with *you* at the start to make it more direct:

You must check the attachment of the warmer support-bearing assembly system to ensure that:

- (a) it is adequately lubricated
- (b) its securing screws are tight, and
- (c) the warmer head can be easily repositioned without the support bearing sticking.

### Cut verbiage

Sometimes the main ideas are obscured by verbiage, as in this 80-word sentence:

The organizers of the event should try to achieve greater safety both from the point of view of ensuring that the bonfire itself does not contain any unacceptably dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or discarded foam furniture and from the

point of view of ensuring the letting-off of fireworks in the designated area, with easily identifiable wardens to be available during the event to prevent people indiscriminately letting off fireworks, to the possible danger of people attending the event.

The redundant words include *from the point of view of* (twice), *itself*, *unacceptably* (what would ‘acceptably’ dangerous materials be?), *discarded* (they wouldn’t be on the pyre otherwise), *during the event*, and *to the possible danger of people attending the event* (crowd safety is the whole point). With verbiage crossed through and insertions underlined, the sentence could be:

The ~~organizers of the event~~ organizers should try to achieve greater safety ~~both by from the point of view of~~ ensuring that the bonfire itself does not contain any ~~unacceptably~~ dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or ~~discarded~~ foam furniture and ~~from the point of view of~~ by ensuring the letting-off of fireworks in the designated area, with easily identifiable wardens to be available ~~during the event~~ to prevent people indiscriminately letting off fireworks, ~~to the possible danger of people attending the event~~.

Then, with a few minor modifications and a full stop after *area*, the sentence becomes:

The event organizers should try to achieve greater safety by ensuring that the bonfire does not contain any dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or foam furniture, and that fireworks are let off only in the designated area. Easily identifiable wardens should be present to prevent people letting off fireworks indiscriminately.

It could also become a list, using the first *that* as a pivot and deleting the second:

The event organizers should try to achieve greater safety by ensuring that:

- the bonfire does not contain any dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or foam furniture
- fireworks are let off only in the designated area, and
- easily identifiable wardens are present to stop people letting off their own fireworks.

## Start afresh

When there's no hope of disentangling a sentence, all you can do is discard it and rewrite. Here's a rambling 87-word sentence from an accountant to his self-employed client:

[Version 1] Our annual bill for services (which unfortunately from your viewpoint has to increase to some degree in line with the rapid expansion of your business activities) in preparing the accounts and dealing with tax (please note there will be higher-rate tax assessments for us to deal with on this level of profit, which is the most advantageous time to invest in your personal pension fund, unless of course changes are made in the Chancellor's Budget Statement) and general matters arising, is enclosed herewith for your kind attention.

Just inserting full stops won't produce meaningful sentences here. Nor can we cut much detail, though verbiage like *from your viewpoint*, *general matters arising*, *herewith*, and *kind* can all go. So we need to start again and plan out the main points, which are:

- (a) Here is our annual bill for services.
- (b) We're charging more than last year because your business has grown rapidly and we'll have to work out a higher-rate tax assessment.
- (c) Now is a good time to pay into your pension fund as you'll get tax relief on your contributions unless the Chancellor alters the rules.

This isn't the best sequence of points because the good news ought to come first. So, with the points in c-a-b order and written as sentences, the result could be:

[Version 2] Now is a good time for you to pay into your pension fund as you will get higher-rate tax relief on your contributions—unless the Chancellor's budget changes the rules. [new paragraph] I have enclosed our annual bill for services. Unfortunately it is higher than last year. This is because your business has grown rapidly and, since your profits are much greater, I will need to calculate a higher-rate tax assessment.

Now it's four sentences and they're understandable at first reading. If you prefer a more informal style, you could use contractions like

*I've, you'll, and I'll* at various points. Keeping the first three sentences but rewriting the fourth as a vertical list would produce a third version:

[Version 3: as version 2 but with a new final sentence] This is because:

- your business has grown rapidly; and
- I will have to work out a higher-rate tax assessment as your profits are much greater.

My 35-strong focus group (see 'Starting points') assessed these versions for clarity. They rated version 3 (when set out in full) as the clearest, with an average score of 18 points from a possible 20, and it was the first preference of 26 people. Version 2 got an average of 14/20 and 3 first preferences. Version 1, the original, scored only 5/20, with 7 people giving it 0/20. These results suggest that sentence length and a bullet-list layout significantly affect readers' perception of clarity.

### Developing paragraphs from topic sentences

As you've seen, we're aiming for sentences that are short but varied in length. Then we have to think about how to build clear paragraphs from them. This matters because, although paragraphs may consist of just a sentence or two, it's more usual for them to have three or more sentences, particularly in reports and detailed emails. Generally, this longer kind of paragraph is a **unit of thought**.

A paragraph may refer back to a previous topic but often it introduces a new one. If so, you can start it with a **topic sentence** that heralds what the new topic will be. The points that follow the topic sentence may go in various directions—perhaps using examples, questions, and pros and cons—but for coherence they should always deal with ideas closely related to the topic sentence. In doing so, they'll usually carry the reader from the topic in the first sentence to a new destination in the final sentence.

Coming up now are several examples of paragraphs that develop from topic sentences. So, for instance, at the end of the previous

section headed *Start afresh*, I could have added this paragraph to round it off better:

*[Topic sentence that raises a valid objection]* Few people would think any less of accountants who occasionally write a bad sentence; after all, they're mainly in the figures business. *[Counter-argument, with evidence]* But as the focus group showed, people do notice the difference between an accountant who writes considerately and one who doesn't. *[Further counter argument about status]* Most professionals want to be held in high esteem by their customers. *[Supporting reason, using 'So' to link]* So, if only for commercial reasons, it's important to control sentence length carefully. *[Finish: reassurance, with a point to remember]* Fortunately this is easily done, and the full stop then becomes the commonest punctuation mark on the page.

This means the reader has journeyed from objection to counter-argument to reassurance.

In the next example, you can see how a writer provides a series of simple statements about how accessible to wheelchair users a tourist destination will be:

*[Topic sentence]* We want to make it as easy as possible for you to make your way around the house and gardens. *[Example]* A lift gives full access to all floors of the house but the number of wheelchairs is limited on the top floor—please ask for details at the entrance desk. *[Further examples]* There is good wheelchair access to most of the garden, the farmyard, the shops and the restaurants. *[Crucial supporting detail]* For accessible toilets, please see the map. *[Finish: harks back to the topic sentence]* We hope you'll enjoy your time here and that you'll become a regular visitor.

Finally, this *Daily Telegraph* paragraph from 3 January 2013 takes you from the topic sentence to examples, then to contradictions, and then to a question that makes you want to read on.

*[Topic sentence]* For the 10th year running, the post-Christmas return to work has been blighted by an above-inflation increase in rail fares. *[Price-rise evidence and why it matters]* Even though incomes have been pegged back by the recession, and families are struggling to make ends meet, ticket prices rose by around 4 per cent on average—and by much more on high-demand lines. *[Longer-term evidence]* Some fares are 50 per cent higher now than they were a decade ago. *[Hook]* Who is responsible for this?

## Other common paragraph patterns

To help your writing flow in a logical way, you can use two easily remembered paragraph patterns: *front linking* and *text chaining*.

In **front-linking paragraphs**, successive sentences talk about the same thing at or near the start. Here, that thing is *the brain* or *it*:

The brain contains 10 billion nerve cells, making thousands of billions of connections with each other. It is the most powerful data processor we know, but at the same time it is incredibly delicate. As soft as a ripe avocado, the brain has to be encased in the tough bones of the skull, and floats in its own waterbed of fluid. An adult brain weighs over 3lb and fills the skull. It receives one-fifth of the blood pumped out by the heart at each beat. [*The Observer*]

In **text-chaining paragraphs**, the reader goes from old/known ('O') information at the start of the first sentence to new/unknown ('N') information at the end of it. That new information then becomes the old at the start of the second sentence, and so on. This pattern is obvious here:

[O] Britain's privatised electricity industry will face a bill for cleaning up acid pollution from its power stations that is more than double [N] that so far admitted. The cost [O] of meeting a European Commission directive to combat acid rain, approved by ministers in June, will approach £3 billion, according to consultants who recently presented a study [N] on strategies to reduce acid pollution to the Department of the Environment. [*New Scientist*]

In many sentences, you'll see that good authors add impact by putting the tastiest or most telling morsels of information at the start or the end, where they're more prominent. Front linking and text chaining are two ways of doing this, so do bear these patterns in mind when you're revising your writing.

You'll also notice that time markers (dates etc.) and other context-setting phrases often come at the start, for example:

In 2019, as climate-change warnings have become more strident, people in the Western world have begun to think more about how their own purchasing choices can make things better.

This shifts the new information to the end, using the old-to-new pattern.

It's worth examining how paragraphs are structured in the editorial columns of your daily newspapers, many of which are freely available on their websites. Usually written under deadline pressure, these columns show ways of building an argument and supporting it with relevant evidence. They often use front-linking and text-chaining patterns, as well as topic sentences.

# 4

## Preferring plain words

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**GUIDELINE** *Use words your readers are likely to understand.*

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Here's a US secretary of state refusing an assistant's request for a pay rise:

Because of the fluctuational predisposition of your position's productive capacity as juxtaposed to government standards, it would be momentarily injudicious to advocate an increment.

This overdresses a simple idea in phrases designed to show the author's high status. In more deferential times, people might have been impressed. Today, they smell pomposity and dislike having to translate into plain words.

A foggy style may also lead busy readers to miss the point. So if you're an accountancy firm, it's poor practice to write a proposal in language like this:

At present the recessionary cycle is aggravating volumes through your modern manufacturing and order processing environments which provide restricted opportunities for cost reduction through labour adjustments and will remain a key issue.

Most people would have to guess the meaning, which might have been:

Output and orders have fallen because of the recession. But reorganizing the way your staff work will do little to cut costs.



If you have a strong selling point, don't obscure it with waffle, as an aeronautics firm did when writing to a prospective customer:

We would anticipate being able to optimize the engine design from an emissions point of view.

—which probably meant:

We can improve the engine design to reduce emissions.

But it's not as bad as this official's obstructive response to a person who had asked to display some posters in a public library:

Your request raises a question as to the provenance and veraciousness of the material, and I must consider individually all posters of a polemic or disputatious nature.

*Provenance* means source or origin. *Veraciousness* means truthfulness. *Polemic or disputatious* means controversial or opinionated. The author may have chosen these unusual words to display high status or to put the person off. Whatever the reason, it's unattractive.

Investors like to have confidence in those who are looking after their money, so fund managers are unwise to send them annual reports written in unexplained jargon. From the Aberdeen Multi-Manager Constellation Portfolio booklet (October 2010), here is a taste of the strange phrasing investors had to read, with my italics acting as an all-purpose emoticon to show surprise, shock, horror, and dismay:

Over the course of the twelve month period, investors have *witnessed market relief*...An *ETF* allows us to *capture short-term beta* within markets...*NAV to NAV*...*Investor sentiment* has therefore varied wildly...We were of the opinion that this fund had performed too well for what is after all an *absolute return orientated mandate*. While we continue to believe in the *Asia growth story* and it remains a *key overweight*, we are also convinced that [the] market offers good *stock pickers* a rich pool to create strong *risk adjusted returns*...Against our expectations of *pedestrian growth* in the developed world...The markets remain focused on the *top down economics* and we are ignoring this *positive bottom up corporate strength*...We believe this *macro focus* creates opportunities for more *bottom up flexible managers to add alpha*.

When Aberdeen's alpha and beta staff cluster round the water cooler, perhaps they converse in the Obscuranto of 'market relief' and 'bottom-up managers', but to many of their customers it must seem like a foreign language.

In 1995 the British government issued a booklet to every household in Northern Ireland on its ideas for peace in the province. Four times the prime minister's foreword said that people should read, understand, and comment on it as part of a public debate. Yet the booklet was largely incomprehensible, with an average sentence length of 35 words and vocabulary that included strange terms like unicameral; *ultra vires*; *inter alia*; cognizant of either option and open to its democratic realization; embrace the totality of relationships; instrument for an intensification; designated functions; appropriate new provisions entrenched by Agreement; comprehensive political accommodation; weighted majority; adumbrated; prejudicing workability; interlocking and mutually supportive institutions; and quantum of public expenditure. There was no glossary to explain any of this, including the terms *unicameral* and *weighted majority*, which were fundamental to the proposals. A local TV company took soundings in Belfast's Markets area and found only mystification. One shopper said, 'I would like somebody to explain it to us all in words that we can understand. I want plain English. I want it set down in front of me so that I can understand it and I can go to my children and say, this is what's happening.'

A Derbyshire bus driver took direct action after he and his colleagues were bemused by a company handbook. In 2001 he translated all its 183 rules into readable prose, much of which the firm adopted. Instead of *Ensure the potential impact of non-routine factors and problems and other services are assessed and details notified promptly to an appropriate person*, he wrote *Inform the depot if you are stuck in traffic or involved in an accident*. Instead of *Ensure machinery for issuing and endorsing tickets is confirmed as in working order and is set in accordance with approved procedure*, he gave *Check the ticket machine is showing the correct date and price*.

Is there no place for unusual words?

The chief reason for workplace writing is to give information in a way that's readily understood—to bridge the gap between what you know and what the reader knows. Generally, plain words do this best. If you wanted to say:

To keep our street trees safe and attractive, we'll be spending more money on pruning and maintaining them.

those are the everyday words you would use. You wouldn't force people to cope with the planning-speak that was, in fact, employed:

We will implement additional expenditure on arboricultural pruning and maintenance to enhance the safety and visual amenity of street trees.

Not that there's anything wrong with long or unusual words in the right place and for the right audience. And many long words aren't unusual—think of *immediately* or *disappointment*. In a technical document, technical words will usually be clear enough to technical people. But it's poor practice for a doctor to say someone is *exhibiting xanthochromia and diaphoresis* if he is really just *yellow and sweating*. Of course, sometimes an unusual word is perfect for the job, expressing just what you want to say; then you should use it and either give an explanation or trust the context to explain. You can even hope that readers will consult a dictionary, and online versions have increased that possibility. In literature and journalism, readers may welcome a break from humdrum vocabulary if it makes the story more interesting and evocative.

Because even many simple English words have multiple meanings (e.g. the verb *locate* can mean *find*, *place*, *mount*, *put*, *position*, and *situate*), aerospace specialists have devised a limited and precise form of English—ASD Simplified Technical English—to help non-native speakers understand it in only the intended sense throughout the world. Aircraft-manual instructions use this controlled language so that one word usually stands only for one thing—*oil* must be used only as a noun, so *The oil is contaminated* is possible but *Oil the bearings* is not. This is a good example of refining the notion of plain English for a special purpose.

## What we can't do

We cannot usually question what a council has done simply because you do not agree with it. There must be some fault by the council. But even then we may not investigate your complaint if you're only slightly affected by what has gone wrong.

There are some things we may not investigate because there is a more appropriate body to deal with your complaint, or because we don't have the legal power to do so. If we can't help, we will tell you about other organisations that may be able to help.

## When to complain

If you have a complaint, the first thing to do is complain to the council. You can find out how to complain from the council, or you can ask a councillor to help. In most cases, the council must have a chance to sort out the complaint before we can consider it.

If you are not satisfied with the council's answer, or if it does not give you an answer within a reasonable time, you can complain to us. We think up to 12 weeks is a reasonable time for the council to investigate your complaint and reply to you.

But where the complaint is urgent, for example, because it is about a school place for next term or because you are particularly at risk, we may be able to deal with it straight away.

You should normally complain to us within 12 months of when you first knew about the problem you are complaining about. If you leave it any later, we may not be able to help.

This page from the Local Government Ombudsman's leaflet *Complained to the council? Still not satisfied?* uses clear and homely language to explain a procedure. Notice the use of personal pronouns (33 uses of *we* and *you* words in 292 words), short sentences (average 19 words), and everyday English. Two sentences start with 'But'—see chapter 17. The Flesch grade level (see chapter 19) is about 8.5 (UK reading age 13.5 years). The two-column layout is open and easy on the eye, with headings in sentence case, ample white space between paragraphs, and unjustified type without line-end hyphenation—see chapter 30. (Size reduced. Second colour not shown. By permission of the Local Government Ombudsman.)

Where technical terms are useful or essential—say when telling people the name of a disease they have—clear explanations are vital. Doctors might readily understand *cardiac atheroma* and *pulmonary oedema*, but a mass audience will get a clearer sense if you add *furring-up of the heart's arteries* and *fluid in the lungs* respectively. Such use of explanations is not strange: the newspapers do it all the time, even slipping one into this quote about a man who'd survived an attack by rainforest tribesmen: 'He's a gregarious guy. He's quite happy to just rock up [arrive without prior planning] and have a chat to someone.' Another newspaper says: 'Vision test: a series of tests to evaluate sharpness of vision (acuity), astigmatism (poor vision caused by an irregularly shaped cornea), colour vision and duochrome (where red and green are used to spot impaired vision).' In the 2008 *Beano* annual, Minnie the Minx plays her usual pranks, this time on a group of Austrians wearing lederhosen. An asterisk leads to a footnote explaining to readers, both young and juvenile, that these garments are leather shorts.

Sometimes highly educated writers are surprised that their everyday words are unusual to others. A paediatrician in the UK who stated her profession on a plaque outside her house found that her doors and windows were daubed with anti-paedophile graffiti. The vandal clearly didn't know what a paediatrician was, and hadn't stopped to wonder why a paedophile would advertise the fact on her house. Similarly, *Personnel Today* reported that when a communications director said in an office memo that he favoured a 'pedagogic' approach during training programmes, he was told to be out of the building by lunchtime as the company did not tolerate 'paedophilic perverts'. After he successfully pleaded a defence based on the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a directive was sent to all staff saying that only words found in the local newspaper would be allowed in future memos—a solution that owed more to face-saving than common sense.

In the queue at a bank cashpoint I eavesdropped as a young man tried to decide from his balance slip whether his account held enough

money to permit a withdrawal. He read it out to his friend: ‘£50.23 CR’, but neither of them could tell whether CR (short for credit) meant he owed money to the bank or vice versa. In the end, they decided he was in debt and left without withdrawing any cash. Wrong decision, of course, but understandable since, if you get credit, you are putting yourself in debt. Some UK banks now speak of payments and receipts, not debits and credits, and the columns on bank statements may be headed ‘Money in’ and ‘Money out’ or ‘Paid in’ and ‘Paid out’ instead of the more traditional ‘Deposits’ and ‘Withdrawals’. In the 2013 edition of this book, I said it wouldn’t be long before the even more basic headings ‘In’ and ‘Out’ were in use, and Halifax Bank has since adopted them. It can be tough for writers who want to be readily understood by a mass audience: they have to guess what words or symbols the average reader is likely to know, and write accordingly.

A similar problem arises with a word much used by lawyers, *notwithstanding*. When testing people’s comprehension of legal documents, I’ve found that few non-lawyers can explain it—even in context. Plainer words are available: *despite*, *in spite of*, *however*, or *but* may all do the same job, in context. *Notwithstanding*—like *forsooth*, *peradventure*, *thrice*, and *verily*—has virtually disappeared from everyday speech and writing. Removing it and other oddities from legal documents will aid understanding, not promote illiteracy by reducing people’s exposure to unusual words. During a clear-writing course for a law firm in 2008, one of the young lawyers—a bright, savvy graduate—expressed surprise about my use of *criterion*, the singular of *criteria*. She’d never seen it before and thought *criteria* was the only form. When this happens among educated users, it may be just a matter of time before dictionaries—which like to say they reflect popular usage rather than prescribe it—start to record *criteria* as a feasible singular.

We shouldn’t worry if words fall into disuse unless distinctions of meaning are also lost. If people no longer understand a word or it’s not doing a useful job, its day is done and other words will move in or be

invented to fill the gap. This has happened throughout history. Once, it was thought correct to use *ye* in such constructions as *ye said* and *gather ye rosebuds while ye may*. But *you* has ousted its rival and we seem to be none the worse. It is dismaying, though, when so many authors and speakers use *refute* to mean merely *deny*, because this endangers the special meaning of *refute* (disprove by giving good evidence) and leaves people wondering what meaning is intended. This poor practice is widespread among broadcast journalists, who thus miseducate their audience.

In English the scope for using simple vocabulary—and the opposite—is wide because so many words have the same or similar meanings (synonyms). For example, the cauldron that bubbled for centuries with bits of Latin, French, Old Norse, and Old English threw up several synonyms for *start*—*begin*, *commence*, *initiate*, *institute*, and *originate*. There's room for all these words, but only *start* and *begin* are first choices in today's plain-English lexicon.

Let's look at two main ways of removing officialese and pompous language: using simpler alternatives, and reorganizing the sentence.

### Use simpler alternatives

In this section, for clarity, the officialese and the equivalent plain English are underlined.

A local government department is writing to a tenant who has fallen behind with her rent. In British law, the authority doesn't have to rehouse tenants it regards as deliberately homeless:

In the event of your being evicted from your dwelling as a result of wilfully failing to pay your rent, the council may take the view that you have rendered yourself intentionally homeless and as such it would not be obliged to offer you alternative permanent housing.

Using plain words and splitting the sentence, this could become:

If you are evicted from your home because you deliberately fail to pay your rent, the council may decide that you have made yourself intentionally homeless. If this happens, the council does not need to offer you alternative permanent housing.

Our focus group found this version far clearer, with 31/35 people preferring it. They gave it an average clarity mark of 17/20, as against 12/20 for the original (a remarkable show of tolerance).

A hospital wants to resolve the chaos in its car parks by charging parking fees:

If my proposals are accepted, the income from fees would ensure that car parking control could be effected without utilising monies that should be expended on health care.

This becomes:

If my proposals are accepted, the income from fees would ensure that car parking could be controlled without using money that should be spent on health care.

An official is writing to a citizen about a claim for a welfare benefit:

I am in receipt of information from the citizens advice bureau, which I believe is acting on your behalf, with regard to matters appertaining to your benefit claim. Will you please furnish the bureau with particulars of your savings.

This becomes:

I have received information from the citizens advice bureau, which I believe is acting on your behalf, about your benefit claim. Will you please give the bureau details of your savings.

A firm's conditions of service say:

Holidays will be taken by mutual agreement after the exigencies of the service have been considered.

It is simpler to replace *exigencies* with *needs*.

Reorganize the sentence

The technique is to spot the unusual word or phrase and use its plain meaning as an aid in revising the sentence.

A trade union writes to its members:

It behoves management to give details of the planned redundancies, and it is incumbent on all members to participate fully in this dispute.



Deleting the unusual words, this becomes:

Management should [or *has a duty* to or *must*] give details of the planned redundancies, and all members should [or *must*] participate fully in this dispute.

A treasurer's report explains how many errors are being made when handling payments:

An approximate frequency for the mistakes was given by Mrs Jones as ten a month.

This becomes:

Mrs Jones said there were about ten mistakes a month.

J Edgar Hoover, when head of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, was worried about the left-leaning artist Picasso visiting the country, so he wrote to a special agent in Paris:

In the event information concerning Picasso comes to your attention, it should be furnished to the Bureau in view of the possibility that he may attempt to come to the United States.

He might have said:

If you get any information about Picasso, please tell the Bureau in case he tries to visit the US.

A company training officer is explaining a trend towards computer-based training:

The ready availability of computer-based tutorials associated with applications software has become prevalent since the development of Microsoft Windows.

To a fellow professional, none of these words would be hard to understand. But look closely at what is being said: *The ready availability... has become prevalent*. Since *ready availability* and *prevalence* are so similar in meaning, the writer could have said:

Since Windows was developed, computer-based software tutorials have become readily available.

## Examples of good plain words that show empathy

Writing is harder when you lack the freedom to tackle interesting topics like music, marine life, and millinery. Your writing day could be occupied by matters so humdrum they'd make a great novelist weep: the rent for a piece of waste land; poor plumbing in the office toilets; a small rise in the price of wheat.

Faced with a dull topic, there's great skill in creating a clear document that rises above the bland and boring. The following letter from an official to an anxious elderly couple is a model of simplicity and empathy. It doesn't give them everything they want—that would be easy to write—but it does explain things fully, while trying to stand in the readers' shoes. No doubt it could still be improved, but here it is, untouched:

Dear Mr and Mrs France

I write concerning an enquiry on your behalf by Councillor Jameson on several matters relating to your home. One of my colleagues will be writing to you about the bath, as I understand you are now having some difficulty with this. As to the decoration of a further bedroom, I am arranging for the foreman painter to call and measure up in order to do the work.

I would expect this to be early in the new year so that the work can be done before the end of March.

At present there are no plans to install central heating in Jasmine Row. None of the properties in Jasmine Row were included in this year's programme. The programme of installations for next year and future years has not yet been drawn up and I cannot say at this stage whether Jasmine Row will be included in it.

It is our policy to install central heating in all our properties in the next few years, and we are steadily working towards this goal. As soon as I have any definite information I will write to you setting out our proposals. If I can help further, please contact me.

At a higher level, here's how the UK's prime minister apologized in 2018 to the Libyan dissident Abdel Hakim Belhaj and his wife Fatima Boudchar about how government failings in 2004 had led to their ill-treatment. Again, you can see a fairly simple style at work, and the most unusual word, *rendition*, would have been all too familiar to the couple.

The Attorney General and senior UK government officials have heard directly from you both about your detention, rendition and the harrowing experiences you suffered. Your accounts were moving and what happened to you is deeply troubling. It is clear that you were both subjected to appalling treatment and that you suffered greatly, not least the affront to the dignity of Mrs Boudchar who was pregnant at the time.

The UK Government believes your accounts. Neither of you should have been treated in this way. The UK Government's actions contributed to your detention, rendition and suffering. The UK Government shared information about you with its international partners. We should have done more to reduce the risk that you would be mistreated. We accept this was a failing on our part.

Later, during your detention in Libya, we sought information about and from you. We wrongly missed opportunities to alleviate your plight. This should not have happened.

On behalf of Her Majesty's Government, I apologise unreservedly. We are profoundly sorry for the ordeal that you both suffered and our role in it.

The UK government has learned many lessons from this period. We should have understood much sooner the unacceptable practices of some of our international partners and we sincerely regret our failures.

The dominant feature here is empathy, as Mr Belhaj pointed out as he praised the letter:

The wording of the apology was heartfelt. There was a feeling of concern; an admission of the shortcomings; an expression of unreserved apology, lessons learned...and...of disappointment towards the international partners that I was handed over to. All of these sentiments that came through in the apology, I welcome them.

Empathy may often be lost in a plain-English style, which can seem dry and emotionless. Its importance is explained by Dr Deborah Bosley, professor emerita, University of North Carolina at Charlotte:

We need to understand emotional responses and write with empathy. Cognitive empathy is the largely conscious drive to accurately recognize and understand another's emotions. The emotions we should be expressing and eliciting are trust, confidence, relief, protection, and understanding. We should help readers trust what we say, have confidence in their decisions, feel relief that the text was easy

and they found the solution, feel that the company or government agency has their back, and easily understand what action they should take. [‘Empathy: the forgotten element in successful content creation’, Content Wrangler blog, 27 October 2015]

### Adjusting the style to the audience

Prominently placed in a hospital leaflet about healthy eating is this sentence taken from a UK Department of Health report, *Weaning and the Weaning Diet* (1994):

The provision of adequate dietary energy to ensure normal growth and development should be a principal determinant of the diets of children under five years of age.

This may be well understood by an audience of health professionals, but what if they want to get the same ideas across to a mass audience? Terms like *principal determinant* and *dietary energy* will be puzzling. According to the Department of Health, the latter just means *calories*, a technical term that will probably be better understood by lay people who know it from diet guides. So the sentence holds an important message for parents of under-fives, namely, ‘Give them plenty of calories, not muesli and skimmed milk; otherwise, they could die of malnutrition’—which has indeed happened occasionally. One reason the sentence doesn’t get this point across is that the verbs are feeble—just *should be* and *to ensure*. Better verbs will bring new life. For example, it could say:

To ensure that children under five grow and develop normally, one of the main things they need is calorie-rich food.

It would then continue by saying what else was needed, as it would if trying to get across these points to an individual parent:

While Helen is under five, she needs food that has plenty of calories. This means things like a, b, and c. These foods will help her grow and develop normally. She also needs some x, y, and z for taste and variety. And, like most children, she needs plenty of suitable physical exercise.

So while the original is in good English, it needs rewriting in plain English to meet the needs of a different audience. By doing this, an apparently complex idea is communicated clearly in a way that will not short-change any of the audiences. This is not dumbing down—a criticism often levelled at advocates of plain English—but clearing up. It's writing as if readers matter.

Visitors to the Bank of England Museum in London can watch a video about gold prices. How dull it could be! But an actor speaks the story in a wry and amusing way while playing the part of an animated ingot, so the facts are more likely to stick in the audience's mind. Again, this is not dumbing down because the information content is the same as if it were delivered in a monotone by a grey-suited bank clerk. The bank's website offers many such lively videos.

Terms that are regarded as common words may sometimes be misunderstood. A survey of 700 patients in an inner-city accident and emergency department found that half thought 'unconscious' people would still be able to hear; 41 per cent believed their eyes could not remain open after losing consciousness; 15 per cent thought they could still talk; and 15 per cent thought they could remain standing. (All these beliefs are wrong, of course.) The study, reported in the *Journal of Accident and Emergency Medicine*, has implications for anyone designing public health information, including the scripts that emergency services use when responding to phone calls. In a leaflet, the signs of unconsciousness would have to be stated; in a call script, questions designed to test for unconsciousness would have to be included.

At Liverpool's Alder Hey children's hospital during the 1980s and 1990s, parents signed consent forms saying, 'I hereby consent to a post mortem examination and to the removal of tissue (other than for the purpose of transplantation) at the time of this examination.' They were unaware that this allowed doctors to harvest and store body parts and whole organ systems. Using similar consents, various hospitals are thought to have stored 150,000 organs. The word *tissue*, taken direct from the Human Tissue Act, wasn't apparently difficult. But its legal meaning differed from its everyday meaning and should have been

explained. The parental grief that arose led to a long and costly government inquiry and fierce legal disputes.

### Conquering fear

The main cause of bloated, show-off writing is fear. First there's fear that being clear means being definite and that being definite leaves no wriggle room. Yet you can convey a full range of doubt and uncertainty—and even the possibility of being just plain wrong—with such words as *may*, *might*, *could*, *should*, *perhaps*, *normally*, and *generally*. So you can be subtle in plain English.

Then there's the fear that if you write simply, you won't be thought sufficiently eminent, scientific, or literary. This fear was examined in a research study by Turk and Kirkman in 1978. Over 1 500 scientists from industry and the academic world were asked their opinion of two short pieces of scientific writing. Both pieces gave exactly the same facts in the same sequence, and used the same five technical terms. The only difference was in the style of the non-technical language. The first version used everyday words and short, simply constructed sentences. The second did the opposite, though without going to extremes. Nearly 70 per cent of the scientists preferred the plain version; they also found it 'more stimulating' and 'more interesting'. Three-quarters judged the writer to be more competent as a scientist and to have a better-organized mind.

So don't be afraid of plain English. Carefully used, it will reveal your competence far better than the wooden style of so many academic and technical journals.

### Plain English word list

If you overuse the words in the left-hand column of the table on page 48, your writing could be perceived as pompous, officious, and long-winded. Not that anyone should forbid you from ever using them, but judicious use of the alternatives will help you to be shorter, simpler, and more conversational. The alternatives aren't always synonyms, so use them with a proper care for meaning and for the job they have to do in the sentence.

Instead of	Consider using
accede	agree, grant, allow
accentuate	strengthen, emphasize
access [verb]	enter, use, gain entry
accordingly	so
accountability	responsibility
accustomed to	used to
acquaint yourself	find out, read, learn about
additional	more, extra
address [sense 'consider']	tackle, deal with, consider
advices	information, instructions
advise [sense 'inform']	inform, tell, let [me] know
aforementioned, aforesaid	[omit or be specific]
aggregate [noun]	total
alleviate	ease, reduce, lessen
allocate	give
ambiguous	more than one meaning
ambit	scope
annuity	pension, lifetime income
annul	cancel
apparent	clear, obvious
applicant	[use 'you' where possible]
apportion	split, divide between/among
apprise	inform, tell, let [me] know
appropriate (adjective)	suitable, right, proper
as a consequence of	because of
ascertain	find out

Instead of	Consider using
assist, assistance	help
attain	reach
attribute [verb]	earmark
brainchild	idea
burgeoning	growing, increasing
category	group
cease	stop, end
cognizant of	aware of, know about
cohort	group [with shared characteristics]
collaborate	work together, work with
commence	start, begin
commencement date	start date
commensurate with	consistent with
component	part
compulsory	required, you must
concept	idea
concerning	about
consequently	so
considerable	large
constitutes	makes up, forms, is
construct [verb]	build
construe	interpret
corroboration	evidence, proof, support
deduct	take away, take off, subtract
deem	treat as, consider
defer	put off, postpone

*Cont.* ►



Instead of	Consider using
deliverables	results, outputs, what we'll provide
designate	name, specify
desist	stop
despatch	send
despite the fact that	although, despite
determine	decide
determine [legal sense]	end, terminate
detrimental	harmful
disburse	pay
discharge [verb]	pay off, settle
disconnect [verb]	cut off
discontinue	stop, end
due to the fact that	as, because
dwelling, domicile*	home, property
egress	exit, way out
elect, election	choose, choice
emanate from	come from, stem from
endeavour	try, attempt
enhance	improve
entitlement	right
envisage	expect, imagine, forecast, think
equitable	fair
erroneous	wrong, mistaken
establish	set up, create, form
eventuate	result, occur, happen
exhaustive	complete

Instead of	Consider using
expedite	hasten, speed up
expenditure	spending
expiration	end
facilitate	help, aid
failure to	if you do not
for the duration of	during, while
for the purpose of	to
forward [verb]	send, give
frequently	often
fundamental	basic
furnish	give, provide
furthermore	also
henceforth	from now on
heretofore	until now
herewith	with this
hitherto	until now
hypothecate	earmark
if this is not the case	if not
if this is the case	if so
impart	give, pass on, tell, inform
implement [verb]	carry out, do
in accordance with	in line with
inasmuch as	because, in that
inception	start
incidence	rate of occurrence, how often
in conjunction with	with

*Cont.* ►

Instead of	Consider using
increment	step, increase
indebtedness	debt
indemnify	fully protect against loss
ingress	entry, way in, comes in
initiate	begin, start
in lieu of	instead of
in order to	to
in receipt of	get, have, receive, receiving
in regard to	about, concerning, on
insofar as	as far as
institute [verb]	begin, start
interim [noun]	meantime, for the time being
in the event of	if, when
in the eventuality of	if, when
in view of the fact that	as, because
irrevocable	cannot be reversed or changed
juncture	point, time
mandatory	required by law, (you) must
manner	way
monies	money, amounts of money
necessitate	need, have to, require
nevertheless	even so, however, yet
nonetheless	even so, however, yet
not less than (ten)	at least (ten)
not more than (ten)	(ten) or less, (ten) or fewer
notwithstanding	even if, despite, still, yet, but

Instead of	Consider using
obtain	get, receive
onus	burden, duty
other than	except
particulars	details, facts
persons	people
perpetrator	(alleged) wrongdoer/offender
peruse	read or study carefully, examine
polemical	controversial
predominantly	mainly
principal [adjective]	main, chief
prioritize	rank
prior to	before
provenance	source, origin
provided that	if
provisions [of a law, policy]	the law, the policy
purchase	buy
purport [verb]	pretend, claim, profess
pursuant to	under
reduction	cut, cutback
regarding	about
reimburse	repay
remittance	payment
remuneration*	pay, wages, salary
remunerative employment	paid work
render	send, make, give
representations	comments

Cont. ►

Instead of	Consider using
reside	live
residence*	home, property, address
save [conjunction]	except
shall [legal obligation]	must
stipulate	state, set, lay down
subsequently	then, later
sufficient	enough
supplementary	extra, more
terminate	end, stop
the law provides that	the law says
thereafter	then, afterwards
the way in which	how
timeously	in good time
tranche	slice, portion, share, chunk
utilize	use
verify	check, prove
whensoever	when, whenever
whereby	by which, because of which
whilst	while
wilfully	deliberately
within	in
with reference to	about, concerning
with regard to	about, concerning
with respect to	about, for, concerning

\* In some contexts, words like *remuneration*, *domicile*, and *residence* have technical meanings and shouldn't be replaced by the alternatives.

## Frequency count

It makes sense to use plain words in essential information because people are already familiar with them from other texts, as shown by their frequency in a set of 200 million words of contemporary British and American English collected by Oxford University Press. The figures in the table below show frequency per million words in 2004. You can make the same checks yourself, free of charge, by using the British National Corpus, a Web-based, 100-million-word collection of late twentieth-century English (90 per cent written, 10 per cent spoken). And it's easy to compare the global frequency of words simply by putting them into a Web browser. See also appendix 1 for a list of the commonest words.

Instead of	Consider using
accordingly 23	so 2 021
advice 0.1	information 496, instructions 38
attain 18	reach 236
category 81	group 514
cease 25	stop 220
commence 13	begin 454
concept 115	idea 324
entitlement 6.51	right 388
forward [verb] 6.55	send 226
initiate 2.4	begin 454
in the event of 8.12	if 2461
monies 2.89	money 320
notwithstanding 7.53	despite 150
particulars 4.29	details 107
persons 43	people 1175

*Cont.* ►

Instead of	Consider using
prior to 26	before 860
purchase 62	buy 235
regarding 44	about 1 943
shall 162	must 667
terminate 12	end 151
utilize/utilise 24	use 1 424
whilst 45	while 667

The figures don't fully compare like with like because it's difficult to examine the senses in which the words are used. However, they do include all the plurals of the nouns and all the verb forms.

The *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* is a good source on word frequency. It also gives information about the grammatical framework that particular words tend to inhabit, and with which other words they usually combine. This can be helpful in creating sentence structures that readers will be familiar with.

Another useful source, covering 2,500 words often seen in official, business, and legal documents, is my *Plain English Lexicon* ([www.clearest.co.uk](http://www.clearest.co.uk)). This draws on the findings of the *Living Word Vocabulary* (LWV) by Edgar Dale and Joseph O'Rourke, who in a 25-year project tested the level of schooling needed to understand particular words. The lexicon states the US grade level at which the word was understood by at least 67 per cent of those tested, the percentage of students who understood it at that level, the UK reading-age equivalent of the US grade level, and the number of times the word appears in the British National Corpus. There's also a commentary on whether authors should use an alternative to many of the words.

# 5

## Writing concisely

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**GUIDELINE** *Use only as many words as you need for meaning and tone of voice.*

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Part of writing well is writing concisely, ruthlessly removing dross. Most readers are busy and want to get your main points quickly. It's unfriendly to make them read more than is necessary, especially in business, where a slew of unwanted verbiage falls on everyone at every level.

For verbal economy, great literature and popular song provide lessons. There's Shakespeare, whose *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1593) opens with this brisk backstory of the tragedy to come: 'Two households, both alike in dignity / In fair Verona where we lay our scene / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.' Not a word wasted amid the tempting detail.

Then there's the song *Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves* (1971), first performed by Cher, which starts: 'I was born in the wagon of a travelling show / My mama used to dance for the money they'd throw / Papa would do whatever he could / Preach a little gospel, sell a couple of bottles of doctor good.' Again, economy of expression to describe a scrabbling, hand-to-mouth existence.

Not that short is always good, though. To make things clear, you sometimes need more words. So plain, certainly, and concise, certainly. But not so plain and concise that you exclude essential points or sound blunt, rude, or graceless. Writing does need depth, too—you need to give enough evidence to make an argument stick.



Removing dross enables your information to shine more clearly. In the early 1900s, Professor William Strunk used to tell his students: ‘Omit needless words, omit needless words, omit needless words.’ Once should have been enough, but he was keen. He said that just as drawings should have no unnecessary lines and machines no unnecessary parts, so sentences should have no unnecessary words.

Easy to agree with, perhaps, but hard to do. The key is to let the first draft stand as long as possible, then return and revise it. Then revise it again. And probably again. In business, of course, time is against you: that letter or report must go out tonight. And useless words aren’t always obvious—they have to be hunted. This chapter examines several ways of dealing with them:

- Striking out useless words (padding).
- Pruning the dead wood, grafting on the vigorous.
- Shortening wordy prepositional (‘prep’) phrases.
- Rewriting completely.

It finishes with some examples for you to test your word-saving skills. But first, to show what’s possible, here’s a worked example that reduces a 95-word loan-company paragraph to just 59 words:

Arrears at present subsist on your mortgage account in the sum of £1,032, with a further payment becoming due on the 11th April. In view of the account being a mortgage account, we are not in a position to stop interest being debited each month and in order to prevent the account situation from deteriorating, it is necessary that payments are received each month which represent the interest debit. At present this amount is £242 and therefore it is regretted your offer to make payments in the sum of £80 a month is not sufficient.

First, strike the useless words:

Arrears ~~at present~~ subsist on your mortgage account ~~in the sum of~~ £1,032, with a further payment ~~becoming~~ due on the 11<sup>th</sup> April. ~~In view of the account being a mortgage account,~~ we are not in a position to stop interest being debited ~~each month and in order~~ to prevent the account ~~situation from~~ deteriorating, it is necessary that payments are received each month which represent the interest

debit. At present this amount is £242 and therefore it is regretted that your offer to make payments in the sum of £80 a month is not sufficient.

Then add vigorous or useful words (underlined):

The arrears ~~subsist~~ on your mortgage account ~~of~~ are £1,032, and ~~with~~ a further payment is due on 11 April. Regrettably we ~~are not in a position to~~ cannot stop interest being ~~debited~~ charged. Therefore, to prevent the account ~~from deteriorating~~, arrears growing, ~~it is necessary that you will need to pay the interest charge~~ are received each month ~~which represent the interest debit~~. At present this ~~amount~~ is £242, ~~therefore~~ so ~~it is regretted~~ we regret that your offer to pay £80 a month is not sufficient.

So the revised version is:

The arrears on your mortgage account are £1,032, and a further payment is due on 11 April. Regrettably we cannot stop interest being charged. Therefore, to prevent the arrears growing, you will need to pay the interest charge each month. At present this is £242, so we regret that your offer to pay £80 a month is not sufficient.

At only 59 words, this is a cut of 38 per cent. It delivers the same facts and is just as courteous—perhaps more so. The ideal letter would also go on to offer the opportunity to discuss the matter and give sources of help and advice.

The focus-group results showed a strong preference for the revised version over the original, with 29/34 people preferring it. It got an average clarity score of 17 marks out of 20, compared with only 10/20 for the original.

Striking out useless words (padding)

The most obvious padding is straight repetition:

The cheque that was received from Classic Assurance was received on 13 January.

As *was received* occurs twice, the sentence could say:

The cheque ~~that was received~~ from Classic Assurance was received on 13 January.

or

The cheque ~~that was received~~ from Classic Assurance ~~was received~~ came on 13 January.

Spotting this kind of thing becomes harder as the distance between repetitions increases:

The standard of traffic management on the A57, A59, and A623 is of a lower standard than on other major roads in the region.

It's absurd that *a standard...is of a lower standard*, so the rewrite would be:

The standard of traffic management on the A57, A59, and A623 is of a lower ~~stand-~~  
~~ard~~ than on other major roads in the region.

Then there are words that repeat an idea, like 'We attach herewith a financial statement.' If the statement is attached—or enclosed—it must be *herewith*, so the word can disappear. Journalists occasionally succumb too: 'In a strongly worded blistering attack at the HFEA's conference, Ms Leather will accuse Prof Zanos of "breathtaking hubris".' If the attack is to be blistering, it will doubtless be strongly worded, so those two words can be omitted. And since at least half the listeners won't understand *hubris*, Ms Leather might as well say *arrogance*.

Wordiness often comes from trying to make a simple procedure sound impressive:

A new bank account is in the process of being set up for you.

Delete four words and this becomes:

A new bank account is ~~in the process of~~ being set up for you.

The verb *carry out* (like *undertake* and *perform*) always merits suspicion; often a more vigorous expression will make the same point more economically. For example, it can simply be deleted:

Work is required to be carried out on the flue and funnels.

becomes

Work is required ~~to be carried out~~ on the flue and funnels.

Or *carry out* can be cut by strengthening the verb it supports:

The firm does not intend to remove the lime trees but it is necessary to carry out pruning to the trees to keep them healthy.

This becomes:

The firm does not intend to remove the lime trees but it is necessary to ~~carry out~~ prune the trees to keep them healthy.

or

The firm does not intend to remove the lime trees but to prune them to keep them healthy.

It's not always so easy to see redundancy. Take this sentence:

For the benefit of new members, the secretary described the rules of the committee and the remit that had been given to it.

As *the benefit of* is implied, those words can be cut. And since *remit* means the committee's terms of reference and a remit must, by its nature, be *given*, the last six words are redundant:

For ~~the benefit of~~ new members, the secretary described the rules of the committee and ~~the its remit that had been given to it~~.

Authors and broadcasters often repeat a *cause* word like *because*, *cause*, *reason*, and *why*. Here are two examples:

The *reason* the quarto version [of Shakespeare's King Lear] is missing 300 lines is *because* Nicholas Okes, the printer, underestimated the amount of paper needed to fit the play.' (*The Times*, 21 April 2016) [read: *The reason... is that*]

Paul Mason... claimed yesterday that the *reason why* most of the [Labour] shadow cabinet resigned two months ago was *because* they feared Corbyn [Labour party leader] would lead them to victory in a rumoured snap election. (*The Times* diary, 29 August 2016) [Delete *why* and replace *because* with *that*; or delete *the reason why* and *was*]

Guidance on gardening and cookery programmes often comes with a long-winded form of repetition that's foreshadowed by the first phrase of the utterance, so all the hapless listeners can do is wait for the

punchline with gritted teeth. That first phrase is *what I'm going to do now*. It leads to this kind of statement: 'What I'm going to do now is I'm going to show you how to cook these courgettes/prepare these cuttings.' A crisper alternative is: 'Let's look at how to ...'.

You can safely omit useless phrases like *it should be pointed out that*, *it must be noted that*, *I should mention that*, *I would inform you that*, and *I would stress that*. Better just to point it out, note it, mention it, or stress it. In the following examples, the useless words are underlined; what remains makes perfectly good sense without them:

I must point out that I am legally obliged to charge rates on the property's current value.

I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for the delay in replying to your complaint.

It should be appreciated that there is always an element of under-reporting of accidents, particularly if no one is injured. It should also be noted that our accident figures exclude occurrences where the system for explosion relief operated effectively.

It is only fair for me to point out at this point that the committee showed great concern about your case at its last meeting.

This letter is to advise you that, following our successful seminar last year for suppliers, we plan to hold another on 13 October.

Pruning the dead wood, grafting on the vigorous

Dead wood often looks alive, so a keen eye is needed. In this example, ten unnecessary words could be replaced by one:

May I draw your attention to the final account dated 28 June from which I note that six payments of £18 were credited to your account from 28 March to 25 August, totalling £108.

The first six words are courteous but they delay the main message unduly and could go. Then, *from which I note* is pompous—what matters is not what the writer notes but what the final account shows. By adding the vigorous verb *shows*, the sentence becomes:

~~May I draw your attention to~~ the final account dated 28 June ~~from which I note~~ shows that six payments of £18 were credited to your account from 28 March to 25 August, totalling £108.

Certain words are prime candidates for pruning. They include *situation*, *aspect*, *facility*, *issue*, *element*, *factor*, *matter*, and *concept*. These abstract words are occasionally useful but tend to be overused at the expense of more concrete words:

The company has one engineer on call at all times, giving excellent speed of response in emergency situations.

Since *emergency situations* are nothing more than *emergencies*, this is the only word needed. *The fact* is often accompanied by verbiage, too. There is *given the fact that* and *in the light of the fact that* (which just mean *as* or *since*); *despite the fact that* (which means *although*); and a wordy phrase loved by politicians, *the fact of the matter is* (which, if it means anything, means *the fact is*). Here, the six deleted words could simply be replaced by *As*:

~~In view of the fact that~~ the central heating was fitted by Union Gas, they have cancelled the bill in the interests of good customer relations.

Removal of padding often reveals other weaknesses. In this example:

We want to improve the physical condition of our leisure facilities.

—it's clear that *physical* adds nothing as the facilities don't have a mental dimension, and *condition* is probably redundant too because improving the facilities will mean improving their condition. This leaves us with 'We want to improve our leisure facilities', but this says so little that details of the work could be given.

Shortening wordy prepositional ('prep') phrases

Prepositions are words like *for*, *to*, *by*, *with*, *from*, *in*, and *of*. Most writing includes prep phrases that are ripe for shortening, with *of*

phrases being the most common. To show what's possible, here are a few examples:

We need the approval of the court. = We need court approval/the court's approval.

Let's talk to the directors of the company. = Let's talk to the company directors.

She is the owner of the property. = She is the property's owner.

His career includes board experience in the private sector. = His career includes private-sector board experience.

Passengers paying for transport expect good value. = Paying passengers expect good value.

We must visit their places of work. = We must visit their workplaces.

Applications for a licence must arrive by the 28th. = Licence applications must arrive by the 28th.

It's time to improve the quality of life for residents. = It's time to improve residents' quality of life.

Show me the article from Sachin. = Show me Sachin's article.

This raised the value of the house. = This raised the house value.

These actions protect the property of a debtor pending the outcome of the hearing of the petition. = These actions protect a debtor's property pending the outcome of the petition hearing.

The use of active-voice verbs also helps you remove *by* prep phrases—chapter 6 says more on this.

### Rewriting completely

When there are far too many words for the message but neither of the first two methods will work, a total rewrite is the only alternative. Various signals may alert you to this need:

- The meaning isn't clear.
- The sentence is long and the verbs are few.
- The verbs are feeble—for example, they are smothered by nouns (see chapter 7), they are in the passive voice (see chapter 6), or they are derived from 'to be' or 'to have' (see chapter 6).

For example, an engineer is writing about the cost of materials for a road scheme:

Overestimating on one type of material could have a detrimental cost effect for the clients, depending on the prices in the Bill of Quantities.

Alarm bells ring at *have a detrimental cost effect*. First because *have* seems feeble as the solitary verb in the sentence, and second because *detrimental cost effect* is a showy way of saying the clients may have to pay more. So the whole sentence could become:

Overestimating on one type of material could cost the clients more, depending on the prices in the Bill of Quantities.

While this saves only four words, there is now a powerful verb, *cost*, and the message is clearer.

Here's a wordy paragraph explaining to residents why the local council has chosen a group of five associations to take over its housing stock:

Between them the group members own the majority of Housing Association owned properties throughout Blackshaw. There are around 5,000 properties that are owned by Housing Associations throughout Blackshaw. The five Associations that are in the Blackshaw Housing Partnership own approximately 4,450 of these properties (89%).

This repeats *association*, *housing*, *owned*, and *properties*. There are also several references to quantities of homes, but few readers will care what percentage the partnership owns—the exact figure doesn't matter in this context. So, instead of 45 words, all that's needed are the following 15:

Between them, the group members own 4,450 of the 5,000 housing association properties in Blackshaw.

An insurance firm is thinking of publishing a guidance booklet for managers of company car fleets. Its internal report on the idea begins:

#### AIM OF PROPOSED CAR FLEET MANAGEMENT GUIDE

This guide would have the objective of highlighting to car fleet managers the best way to achieve, and the benefits of adopting, a professional approach vis-à-vis managing a car fleet.

There are only a few publications at present covering the subject of car fleet management and with no current insurance company involvement there would appear to be a definite market niche for us to explore.



This makes sense but is far too flabby:

- *Would have the objective of highlighting* is a wordy way of saying *aims* or *seeks*.
- In plain words, *vis-à-vis* means *towards* or *to*.
- Sentences beginning *there are*, *there is*, and *there were* are often wordy and reduce the strength of any remaining verbs. Two *there* verbs are present here.
- In *the subject of car fleet management*, the first three words are redundant because readers know from the heading that *car fleet management* is a subject.
- *No current insurance company involvement* smothers the verb *involve* (see chapter 7). In any case, a more expressive verb would be *publish* or *produce*.
- *Insurance company* could be reduced to *insurer*.

So a first redraft might say:

#### AIM OF PROPOSED CAR FLEET MANAGEMENT GUIDE

This guide would show car fleet managers how they could best achieve a professional approach to managing a car fleet and the benefits of doing so. At present, only a few publications cover car fleet management. None of them is produced by insurers so there is a definite market niche for us to explore.

A second redraft would go a little further:

#### AIM OF PROPOSED CAR-FLEET MANAGEMENT GUIDE

This guide would show car-fleet managers how to do their work more professionally and why this would benefit them. Few publications cover car-fleet management, none of them from insurers. So there's a market niche for us to exploit.

The original had 72 words, this has 48—a cut of one third. What remains is tight and doesn't waste the reader's time.

Test your word-saving skills

These examples aren't bad English but they each include one or more redundant words. Can you spot them? Answers are shown below.

**Q1:** The owners need to stop the rain from coming in.

**Q2:** If a container is fairly watertight, the air inside will prevent it from sinking for weeks.

- Q3:** In order to suspend debate, she used a technicality.  
**Q4:** The oil platforms are in the process of being onshored and recycled.  
**Q5:** The officials proposed a wide range of different policies.  
**Q6:** We need to set aside as much money as we possibly can, going forward.  
**Q7:** At this particular moment of time, there are several spoil heaps that are in imminent danger of collapse.  
**Q8:** There are too many staff who are not pulling their weight.  
**Q9:** The expert said the picture was an exact replica of mine.  
**Q10:** They made a major breakthrough, and so therefore new investment money poured in.  
**Q11:** At close of business as of today's date, the bank balance was \$52,000.  
**Q12:** They repeated the same mistake again.

### Answers and explanations

- A1:** Omit *from*. Eliminate the *from* virus. It's everywhere.  
**A2:** Omit *from*. Ditto.  
**A3:** Omit *In order to*.  
**A4:** Omit *in the process of*.  
**A5:** Omit *different*—the policies will inevitably differ.  
**A6:** Omit *possibly* and *going forward*. The word *can* covers *possibly* and the sense is future, so *going forward* is redundant (as it often is).  
**A7:** Rewrite as *Several spoil heaps are in imminent danger of collapse*. Often, phrases that go *there are...that; there were...that; or there is...that* can be shortened like this. The phrase *At this particular moment of time* usually just means *now or today or at the moment*, and here it can simply be omitted.  
**A8:** Rewrite as *Too many staff are not pulling their weight*. See A7 for the reason.  
**A9:** Omit *exact* because *replica* means 'exact copy'.  
**A10:** Omit *major* as *breakthroughs* must be major. Replace *and so therefore* with *so*.  
**A11:** Omit *as of today's date* and just use *today*.  
**A12:** Omit *again* because *repeated* covers it.

# 6

## Favouring active-voice verbs

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**GUIDELINE** *Prefer active-voice verbs unless there's a good reason for using the passive.*

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In most active-voice sentences, the doer comes before the verb it governs. So this sentence has an **active-voice verb** (shown in bold):

FredCo **will demolish** the building.

—while this sentence says the same thing but uses a **passive-voice verb**:

The building **will be demolished** by FredCo.

Use of the passive is widespread in business and government, fostered by bad teaching in schools and universities that equates good writing with formality, obscurity, and impersonality. Because the passive is part of a style that helps people pass exams, they often carry it into their working life, where, subconsciously, they keep trying to impress their previous teachers. This may explain why the passive-infested style remains rife among professionals at all levels in many countries. So it's no surprise that an accountant's newsletter to clients includes this sentence in which five passive-voice verbs (shown in bold), all lacking doers, queue up to muddy the meaning in a total triumph for the Fog People:

Although the inflation factor can **be used** against bonds it can usually **be assumed to be priced** into the current yield of investment grade bonds the capital of which can safely **be assumed to be repaid** at maturity.

This chapter explains:

- the difference between active and passive
- how to convert one to the other
- why the active should be your first choice
- how using *I* and *we* can make formal reports more readable, and
- how to check your passive percentage.

Many writers have damned the passive voice unreservedly. In 1946, George Orwell (of *Animal Farm* fame) wrote: ‘Never use the passive where you can use the active.’ But this is going much too far, even though Orwell did complete his writing tips by saying ‘Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.’ Certainly the active tends to make the writing tighter and more personal, and introduces action earlier in sentences, while the passive tends to do the opposite. Yet the passive is still valuable, as we’ll see.

The words *passive* and *active* are well understood in their everyday meanings: ‘Some men take an *active* role in infant care, but too many are *passive*.’ These everyday meanings differ from their grammatical ones. So, as you read this chapter, please suppress the everyday meanings as they don’t apply here. Also, *passive* does not mean *past*. In grammar, *past*, *present*, and *future* are to do with time and completeness and are called *tenses* (see chapter 11). *Passive* and *active* are about how the action is done, and are called *voices*.

Recognizing active-voice verbs (‘active verbs’, for short)

Putting the doer or agent—the person or thing doing the action in the sentence—in front of its verb will usually ensure the verb is active. The following sentences all have active verbs (in bold) because the doers precede the verbs they govern:

The president **wants** an improved health service.  
 I **walked** up the stairs.  
 She **hates** going to work.  
 This ice cream **tastes** revolting.

Most of us favour active verbs when we speak. People would think you odd if you continually said things like *The house is being bought by me* (passive) instead of *I am buying the house* (active), though the meaning is the same if they are spoken with the same emphasis.

Occasionally a verb can be followed by a doer, yet remain active:

She used to hate going to work, said her sister.

Here *her sister* follows *said* but the verb is still in the active because *said her sister* is just an inversion of *her sister said*.

In an example like *Armies are on the march*, the verb *are* (part of *to be*) is called a **linking** or **copular** verb because there's no real action in it. It expresses a state and it's a bit like an equals sign. These linking verbs are always in the active voice. Other examples include *seem*, *become*, and *get*.

Recognizing passive-voice verbs ('passive verbs', for short)

In most sentences with a passive verb, the doer or agent follows the verb or isn't stated, as here (verbs in bold):

- (a) Three mistakes **were admitted** by the director.
- (b) Coastal towns **are being damaged** by storms.
- (c) Verdicts **will** soon **be delivered** in the Smith case.

In (a) and (b), the doers (*director* and *storms*) follow the verbs through which they act. In (c), the doer is not stated; no one can tell who or what will give the verdicts. This kind of verb is called the **truncated passive**.

To put (a) and (b) into the active, you simply bring the doer (in bold) to the start of the sentence:

**The director** admitted three mistakes.

**Storms** are damaging coastal towns.

To convert (c) into the active, you would need to know the doer:

[**The judge**] will soon deliver verdicts in the Smith case.

An almost infallible test for passives is to check whether the verb consists of:

- part of the verb *to be* (though this is sometimes implied rather than stated, as in many newspaper headlines where space is tight—*Explorer [is] attacked in jungle*), and
- a past participle.

This is an easy test to apply if you can already recognize parts of *to be* and past participles. If not, here's how:

### *Parts of the verb 'to be'*

**Present tense** (explained in chapter 11): *am, is, are, am being, is being, are being.*

**Past tenses:** *was, were, has been, have been, had been.*

**Future tense:** *will be, shall be.*

**Infinitive** (explained in chapter 11 and later in this chapter): *to be, to have been.*

Be careful, however, not to confuse parts of *to be* with parts of *to have*, which are *has, had, and have*. The difference is clear from the expressions *You are a pig* and *You have a pig*. The first is about being, the second about possession.

### *Past participle*

All verbs have a past participle. To find it, begin with the infinitive form of the verb, for example:

to attract      to annoy      to decide      to go

Cross out *to* and send the rest into the past tense:

~~to~~ attract + ed      ~~to~~ annoy + ed  
~~to~~ decide + d      ~~to~~ go = gone or went

The first three are past participles. In the fourth, you need to apply a tiebreak by putting *we have* in front of each word, producing *we have gone* and *we have went*. Only the first of these makes sense in standard

English, so *gone* is the past participle while *went* is just a past tense. The tiebreak is useful because some common verbs have two candidates for past participle: *see* (seen/saw); *eat* (eaten/ate); *take* (taken/took); and *give* (given/gave). Applying the tiebreak reveals that the first alternative is the past participle in each case in standard English, but not in some dialects.

Applying the full test for passives to the example sentences, it's clear they all fulfil its criteria:

- (a) Three mistakes **were admitted** by the director.
- (b) Coastal towns **are being damaged** by storms.
- (c) Verdicts **will soon be delivered** in the Smith case.

In (c) the fact that *soon* is splitting the verb makes no difference—the verb *will be delivered* is still passive.

Computerized grammar checkers search for passives by applying the same test. Unfortunately this will occasionally throw up phantom passives. For example, *is tired* would be flagged as a passive in Samuel Johnson's proverbial sentence of 1777:

When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.

—as it appears to fulfil the criteria of having part of *to be* and the past participle of *to tire*. But it cannot be a passive because no doer can be attached to *is tired* and none is implied. *Tired* in each case is a description of the man, not part of the verb. The word *is* is a linking (copular) verb in the active voice. The same logic applies to statements like this:

The pilots are concerned about the new runway

—where *are* is active and *concerned* is not part of the verb *to concern* but a description of the pilots' state of mind.

### Converting passives to actives

Though using the active in the short examples that follow will produce only small gains in clarity and economy, a general preference for active

over passive will significantly improve the readability of most documents when taken as a whole.

A financial adviser writes to her client:

We have been asked by your home insurers to obtain your written confirmation that all their requirements have been completed by yourself.

By applying the test, *have been asked* and *have been completed* are revealed as passives. Use of the active—putting the doers in front of the verbs—gives:

Your home insurers have asked us to obtain your written confirmation that you have completed all their requirements.

Would the focus group prefer either version, as the only difference is in the use of active and passive? Though the group regarded both as clear (13/20 points for the passive sentence, 17/20 for the active), 28/35 people preferred the active—a striking result.

A safety official writes (passives in bold):

A recommendation **was made** by inspectors that consideration **be given** by the company to the fitting of an interlock trip between the ventilation systems to prevent cell pressurisation.

Converting passive to active, the sentence becomes (actives in bold):

Inspectors **made** a recommendation that the company **give** consideration to the fitting of an interlock trip between the ventilation systems to prevent cell pressurisation.

Then, using the strong verbs hidden beneath *recommendation* and *consideration*, the sentence becomes even crisper—and ten words shorter than the original:

Inspectors **recommended** that the company **consider** fitting an interlock trip between the ventilation systems to prevent cell pressurisation.

In the focus group, 18/35 people preferred this final version over the passive sentence. Nine preferred the passive, while the others couldn't decide.



## Why the active should be your first choice

Verbs provide so much useful information that readers often prefer to get them early in sentences, which tends to happen when the verbs are active. Putting an important verb late forces readers to store large chunks of text in their short-term memory while they wait to discover the doer and what the action will be. The problem is worsened if there are other hurdles, like brackets containing exceptions and qualifications:

If you decide to cancel your application, a cheque for the amount of your investment (subject to a deduction of the amount (if any) by which the value of your investment has fallen at the date at which your cancellation form is received by us) will be sent to you.

*You decide* and *has fallen* are active, while *is received* and *will be sent* are passive. As *will be sent* is too far (36 words) from the noun it refers to, which is *cheque*, it should be switched to the active. This single change would produce:

If you decide to cancel your application, **we will send you** a cheque for the amount of your investment (subject to a deduction of the amount (if any) by which the value of your investment has fallen at the date at which your cancellation form is received by us) ~~will be sent to you~~.

This would be the first stage in a sweeping kill of brackets and other debris that would produce:

If you decide to cancel your application, we will send you a cheque for the amount of your investment less any fall in its value at the date we receive your cancellation form.

This is a third shorter than the original. Using the active voice has opened the door to other good writing practices.

The passive voice tends to make companies look uptight, defensive, evasive, and unapproachable, as in this sentence in an annual benefits statement to investors:

Benefits from contributions invested in the With-Profits Fund are not guaranteed and are dependent on the bonuses declared by us.

The passives are *[are] invested*, *are guaranteed*, and *[are] declared*, while *are dependent* is a feeble form of *depend*. By using five active-voice verbs, the sentence takes on a more pleasant and open tone of voice:

We can't guarantee the benefits you'll get from the contributions we've invested on your behalf in the With-Profits Fund. That's because these benefits will depend on the bonuses we declare.

### Using 'I' or 'we' in formal reports

The myth that *I* and *we* should be avoided in formal reports has crippled many writers, causing them to adopt clumsy and confusing constructions like referring to themselves as *the writer* or *the author* and using impersonal passives like *it is thought*, *it is felt*, *it is believed*, *it is understood*, and:

It is considered that fluoridation of drinking water is beneficial to health.

—from which readers have to guess who is expressing the view: the writer, wider scientific opinion, public opinion, or all three. Readers should not have to guess. Attempts to ban *I* and *we* are particularly strange in that any other person, creature, or thing may be mentioned in a report. Oddly, one group of diehards against the use of *I*, *me*, and *my* are newspaper columnists, who often refer to themselves as *this columnist*, *this column*, *your correspondent*, and even *this sketch*.

Opponents of the personal pronoun sometimes give the impression it's a daring and novel device. Yet personal pronouns in official documents are nothing new. In the Victorian era, the British government was eager to investigate promising new technologies like the typewriter—'mechanical contrivances invented for economizing the labour of writing by hand'—and appointed a committee to 'inquire into copying machines, departmental printing, &c'. The authors of its often quaintly written report of 1877—which includes such headings as 'The Type Writer', 'The Type Writer discussed', and 'Its adoption likewise advocated'—regularly used *we* and *our*:

We have visited all the chief public Departments in London...

How far these objects have been satisfactorily attained, and how far such contrivances may be usefully applied in public Departments, it has been our duty to consider and report. We shall first briefly describe the various processes which have been brought under our notice.

If you're writing on your own behalf, use *I* and *my* when they help you to state your case, but don't overdo it for fear of seeming self-centred. If you're writing on behalf of two or more people, let *we* and *our* do the same job. If there's an overriding reason why these tactics are impossible, you should still ensure most of your sentences have doers—perhaps the name of your section, department, or organization.

Writers of scientific and technical material will especially benefit from using *I* and *we*, which are commonplace in the *British Medical Journal*, for example. Unless a journal specifically prohibits these words—and most do not—you should feel free to use them.

Almost everyone who writes about scientific and technical writing recommends personal pronouns. As Turk and Kirkman put it in *Effective Writing* (Spon, 1989):

There is no good reason why personal pronouns should be scrupulously avoided. Readers are aware they are reading about the work of people, and their assessment of the experimental work reported will include an assessment of the personal competence of the scientist. It is artificial to avoid personal references in scientific writing.

So don't be seduced by the idea that impersonal writing makes you sound more scientific: no one ever became a scientist by wearing a white laboratory coat.

Warning: passives can be useful

Passive verbs have their uses, and it would be silly—as well as futile—to outlaw them. There are five main reasons for using them:

- To defuse hostility—actives can sometimes be too direct and blunt.
- To avoid saying who did the action, perhaps because the doer is irrelevant or obvious from the context. In this example, the three passives (in bold) are all OK because the doers are obvious: 'Police **were positioned** on rooftops around Turf Moor, helicopters hovered above, streets **were cordoned off**, and several pubs **were shut**!'

- To focus attention on the receiver of the action by putting it first—‘An 18-year-old girl **has been arrested** by police in connection with the Blankshire murders.’
- To spread or evade responsibility by omitting the doer, for example: ‘Regrettably, your file **has been** lost.’
- To help in positioning old or known information at the start of a sentence or clause, and new information at the end.

The last point relates to an important benefit of the passive. Consider this about a nuclear reactor:

Concern has been raised about arrangements for gaining immediate access to the chimney. Winch failure or the presence of debris between the platform edge and the chimney internal wall may necessitate access.

The second sentence, written in the active voice, doesn’t seem to follow from the first, whose main point—placed late in the sentence—is about gaining access. So let’s put one of the verbs into the passive voice (shown in bold):

Concern has been raised about arrangements for gaining immediate access to the chimney. Access **may be needed** if the winch fails or there is debris between the platform edge and the chimney internal wall.

The second sentence immediately mentions the problem of access and develops it. There’s now a clear link between *gaining immediate access* in the first sentence and why this *may be needed* in the second. The passive verb has made the link.

### Checking your passive percentage

Manually or by using a computerized language checker like StyleWriter or Word, you can see how many passives you use. Your passive percentage is given by the formula:

$$100 \times (\text{Number of passives} \div \text{number of sentences})$$

A score of over 50 per cent means one passive every two sentences. Do you really need so many? A score of 25 per cent is one passive every four sentences, which may be OK for a mass audience if other style features are good.

# 7

## Using vigorous verbs

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**GUIDELINE:** *Use good verbs to express the action in your sentences.*

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Well-chosen verbs give your writing power and precision. In most sentences you should express the action through verbs, just as you do when you speak. But too often verbs are smothered, all their vitality trapped beneath heavy noun phrases. This chapter is about releasing the value in these verbs—an excellent way of dispelling fog.

This list shows what I mean by **smothered verbs**:

- Commuters don't *apply* for a travel pass: they make an **application**.
- Speakers don't *inform* the public: they give **information**.
- Staff don't urgently *consider* a request: they give it urgent **consideration**.
- Managers don't *evaluate* a project: they perform an **evaluation**.
- Scientists don't *analyse* or *review* data: they conduct an **analysis** or carry out a **review**.
- People don't *renew* their library books: they carry out a process of library-book **renewal**.

In each case the simple verb (shown in *italics*) is being converted into a noun (shown in **bold**) that needs support from another verb. The technical term for a noun that masks a verb in this way is **nominalization**. There's nothing wrong with nominalization as such—it's a useful part of the language—but overuse tends to freeze the action and requires more words.

We can think of this inflated style as being produced by a **chain of obscurity**. The chain converts the simple verb *apply* into *applicable*,

*applicability*, and *application*; and it converts *need* and *require* into *requisite*, *necessity*, *requirement*, *necessitated*, and *essential prerequisite*, until the life has been squeezed from the writing.

The smothered-verb style is common in officialdom everywhere. In India, it's also widespread in journalistic and business English, as Jyoti Sanyal's book *Indlish* shows. He states two reasons. First, the enduring influence of British literary and commercial Victorians, who favoured the wordy style of Mr Micawber in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*:

I am at present engaged, my dear Copperfield, in the sale of corn upon commission. It is not an avocation of a remunerative description—in other words, it does not pay—and some temporary embarrassments of a pecuniary nature have been the consequence.

Sanyal's free translation goes: 'I now sell corn on commission, Copperfield, but it does not pay and I'm in debt.'

His second reason is that in most Indian languages, the noun is the main word in the sentence and nouns are rarely directly convertible into verbs as they are in English, where nouns like *bank*, *oil*, *change*, *loop*, and *plate*—to list but five among thousands—can all be verbs as well. So an author whose mother tongue is Hindi, Bengali, or Gujarati tends to favour its natural 'nouniness' when writing in English. Sanyal gives this ponderously nouny example from a newspaper editorial:

Another major disaster so soon after last month's accident highlights the inexcusable failure of the Railways in ensuring the requisite alertness for precluding a disaster which has claimed so many victims.

By removing descriptive froth and using some lively verbs (shown here in bold), the newspaper could have made its point in a third fewer words:

Coming so soon after last month's disaster, this accident **proves** the railways can't **stay** alert enough to **prevent** such horrors.

The examples in the rest of this chapter show how vigorous verbs can improve three types of construction containing nominalizations, making them more powerful and concise:

- Nominalization linked to parts of *to be* or *to have*.
- Nominalization linked to active verbs or infinitives.
- Nominalization linked to passive verbs.

### Nominalization linked to parts of 'to be' or 'to have'

Parts of *to be* include *are, is, was, were, has been, and have been*. Parts of *to have* include *has, had, and have*. Of course, many sentences whose only verbs are parts of *to be* or *to have* are perfectly clear and crisp, for example:

- All animals **are** equal, but some animals **are** more equal than others. [*Animal Farm*, Orwell]
- **To be** or not **to be**: that is the question. [*Hamlet*, Shakespeare]
- Detailed management information **is** available. [Anon.]

In other sentences, the linking of such a verb with a nominalization is a good reason for suspecting that improvement is possible, as in this example from an official letter:

I have now had sight of your letter to Mr Jones.

The main verb is *had* while the nominalization is *sight*, which smotherers *see*. So it would be simpler to say:

I have now **seen** your letter to Mr Jones.

This example is from a business letter:

Funding and waste management have a direct effect on progress towards the decommissioning of plant and equipment.

The main verb is *have* while the nominalization is *effect*, which smotherers *affect*. It's crisper to write:

Funding and waste management **directly affect** progress...

The combination of part of *to be* and a nominalization is easy to see in this example:

The original intention of the researchers was to discover the state of the equipment.

The nominalization is *intention*, smothering *intend*, while *was* acts as a prop. A revision would say:

The researchers originally **intended** to discover the state of the equipment.

This example is from a report:

There is therefore an expectation on our part that the land will be used for building.  
which becomes:

So we **expect** the land will be used for building.

In those last two examples, I've simply moved the doer to the front and attached an active-voice verb to it. Compared to, say, tying shoelaces, this is not a difficult skill.

Nominalization linked to active verbs or infinitives

This construction is easy to rewrite as the presence of active verbs usually enables the word order to be preserved, for example:

The conservation group says the department should proceed with the introduction of six mini-recycling centres.

The nominalization is *introduction*, supported by *proceed with*. The rewrite uses the active voice to reveal the smothered verb:

The conservation group says the department should **introduce** six mini-recycling centres.

A company report explains what some of the staff do:

The team's role is to perform problem definition and resolution.

Using the smothered verbs *define* and *resolve*, this becomes:

The team's role is to **define** problems and **resolve** them.

or

The team's role is to **define** and **resolve** problems.



or, risking a slight change of meaning:

The team **defines** and **resolves** problems.

A government department writes:

Our policy branch has carried out a review of our procedures in order to effect improvements in the reporting of accidents.

Here there are two nominalizations, *review* and *improvements*, supported by *carried out* and *effect*. Using vigorous verbs (and putting the purpose first) produces:

**To improve** the reporting of accidents, our policy branch **has reviewed** our procedures.

It's also possible to convert noun-heavy writing into bullet-point lists. Instead of:

Meeting the new lead-in-water standards requires a combination of plumbosolvency reduction and lead pipework replacement operations.

it would be simpler to write:

To meet the new lead-in-water standards, **we are**:

- **reducing** the level of dissolved lead in the water, and
- **replacing** lead pipework.

Nominalizations linked to passive verbs

This construction is harder to revise because changing from passive to active disrupts the original word order. To compensate, though, the joy is usually greater. In this example, a housing company writes:

Notification has been received from the insurers that they wish to re-issue the Tenants Scheme Policy.

Using the smothered verb *notify* produces:

The insurers **have notified** us they wish to re-issue the Tenants Scheme Policy.

A safety officer writes:

An examination of the maintenance records for the plant was carried out by Mrs Adeyoju.

This becomes, by the same technique:

Mrs Adeyoju **examined** the maintenance records for the plant.

A company writes:

A reduction in payroll costs can be achieved if payslip printing is no longer required.

The nominalizations are *reduction* and *printing*, supported by *be achieved* and *is required*. Revealing the verbs produces:

Payroll costs **will fall** if payslips **are** no longer **printed** or If **we stop printing** payslips, our payroll costs **will fall**.

When the going gets tougher

Sometimes, the Fog People have been hard at work, so the problems are more difficult to spot. But remember some common signals—nominalizations (often ending in *-ion*), passive voice, the verbs *make*, *perform*, and *carry out*, and verbs derived from *to be* or *to have*.

A local government department writes:

The committee made a resolution that a study be carried out by officials into the feasibility of the provision of a skateboard park in the area.

Here, rewriting can be split into three steps:

- 1 The nominalization *resolution* becomes a strong verb: 'The committee *resolved* that'.
- 2 The nominalization *study* becomes an active verb: 'officials should *study*'.
- 3 The nominalization *provision* becomes a present participle (see chapter 11): 'the feasibility of *providing* a skateboard park in the area'.

So the complete rewrite is either:

The committee resolved that officials should study the feasibility of providing a skateboard park in the area *or* The committee resolved that officials should investigate whether it's feasible to provide a skateboard park in the area.

An accountant writes:

The incidence of serious monetary losses in several transactions entered into by the firm during the year is causing us great concern.

*Incidence*, meaning *rate of occurrence*, isn't derived directly from a verb. Here it's probably just posh talk for *occurrence*. The verb of choice would be *occur*, so a rewrite could say:

The serious monetary losses that have occurred in several transactions entered into by the firm during the year are causing us great concern.

Then, reorganizing this so that the main doer comes first, the result would be either:

We're very concerned about serious monetary losses in several of the firm's transactions during the year *or* The firm has lost large sums in several transactions this year, which concerns us greatly.

These word-savings would be too trifling to justify the effort, if brevity was the only criterion. More important is that readers can now get the meaning without stumbling and backtracking.

# 8

## Using vertical lists

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**GUIDELINE** *Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.*

---

Vertical lists have become a common feature of many documents since the 1970s, helping to present complex information in manageable chunks. For example, instead of saying this:

The Moorside Plan is a new way of planning for the future of our area. It will set the framework within which we plan for the future and includes important choices about development within Moorside. It will provide us with a clear vision to guide development and will promote measures to improve our economy, provide the homes we need, and protect our environment.

—which will make busy readers yawn, we could say this:

The Moorside Plan is a new way of planning for the future of our area which will:

- set the framework in which we plan for the future
- include important choices about development in Moorside
- give us a clear vision to guide that development, and
- promote measures to improve our economy, provide the homes we need, and protect our environment.

Though this takes more space, it's easier to grasp and readers may still be awake at the end.

Vertical lists can cause trouble in three areas, which I'll examine in turn:

- Keeping the listed items in parallel.
- Punctuating the listed items.
- Numbering the listed items.

Keeping the listed items in parallel

A dietitian is explaining how a patient should cut her salt consumption:

To restrict your salt intake, you should:

- not add salt at the table
- use only a little salt in cooking
- do not use bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking
- avoid salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts, olives.

All the listed items are understandable individually and they're all commands, so to that extent they're in parallel. But the third point doesn't fit with the lead-in or 'platform' statement. Together they are saying:

you **should do not use** bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking

—which is nonsense. Obviously, *do* should be struck out to create a true parallel structure:

To restrict your salt intake, you should:

- not add salt at the table
- use only a little salt in cooking
- not use bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking
- avoid salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts, olives.

But the job isn't complete, as there's now an odd mix of positive and negative. The best solution is to shift the remaining positive statement into the platform:

To restrict your salt intake, you should use only a little salt in cooking. Also, you should *not*:

- add salt at the table
- use bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking, or
- eat salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts, and olives.

Sometimes a platform needs to be created to maintain the parallel structure. Here, a clerk is being told how to do a task:

- You should check that the details on the self-certificate or medical certificate match those on the person's information card.
- You should check that the certificate has been completed correctly and conforms to the rules on validity.
- That the certificate covers the period of absence.

By the third item the author must have got tired of writing *you should check that*. Rather than omit it, they should have converted it into a platform statement to produce:

You should check that:

- the details on the self-certificate or medical certificate match those on the person's information card
- the certificate has been completed correctly and conforms to the rules on validity, and
- the certificate covers the period of absence.

Often a vertical list is easier to read if each listed item has a similar grammatical structure. For example, they could all be statements that begin with infinitives or active verbs or passive verbs or present participles (see chapter 11 for explanations). In the following list, all the listed items are passive-verb statements, in bold for ease of reference:

The inspector should check that:

- the vehicle **is** properly **marked** with hazard plates
- the engine and cab heater **are switched off** during the unloading of explosives
- any tobacco or cigarettes **are kept** in a suitable container and cigarette lighters **are not being kept** in the cab[, and]
- the explosives **are** securely **stowed**[.]

There would be no harm in adding some active-voice statements as long as they made sense when linked to the platform, in which case the square-bracketed bits above would disappear:

- there are no unsecured metal objects in the vehicle's load-carrying compartments, and
- the vehicle is carrying at least one efficient fire extinguisher.

When statements with different grammatical structure are mixed haphazardly, the reader has to stop and backtrack. In the next example, the listed items have infinitives, actives, passives, or no verbs at all:

When Ms Kanhai began work, she established the following aims:

- make the regulations simple to understand and up to date in structure and layout
- to update forms, leaflets, and the website where necessary with details of current fees
- the effects of competition will be considered
- the creation of a document summarizing details of the regulations, which will enable people to focus on key issues and requirements
- recent changes in legislation should be taken into account.

As these points are supposed to be aims, they could all be written as infinitives:

When Ms Kanhai began work, she established the following aims:

- **To make** the regulations simple to understand and up to date in structure and layout.
- **To update** forms, leaflets, and the website where necessary with details of current fees.
- **To consider** the effects of competition ~~will be considered~~.
- **To create** ~~the creation of~~ a document summarizing details of the regulations, which will enable people to focus on key issues and requirements.
- **To take account of** recent changes in legislation ~~should be taken into account~~.

Readers get used to the pattern here, so they can concentrate better on the meaning. I've given the listed items initial capitals and full stops as they are complete statements, in this case 'aims' (see next section).

### Punctuating the listed items

Vertical lists need punctuating as consistently as possible so readers get used to a pattern and are not distracted by deviations. Here's a typical example of inconsistency:

The new job-holder will:

- develop a set of guidelines for clean wastepaper recycling
- Introduce green bins for clean wastepaper at appropriate places;
- monitor compliance with departmental targets.

Two of the listed items begin with a lower-case letter and a third with a capital. One listed item ends with a semicolon, a second with a full stop, and a third with nothing at all.

For greater consistency in situations like this, I suggest a two-part standard for all except legal documents.

**The first part of the standard** is that when a listed item is a sentence fragment that relies on the platform statement to give it meaning, it should begin with a lower-case letter and end without punctuation—except for the final item, which will normally end with a full stop. This produces the following result:

The new job-holder will:

- develop a set of guidelines for clean wastepaper recycling
- introduce green bins for clean wastepaper at appropriate places
- monitor compliance with departmental targets.

If preferred, you could add a comma and *and* after each of the first two items or, more conventionally, after the second item only.

If (improbably) you wanted to show that only one of the jobs had to be done, it would be better to say so clearly. Less obvious would be to put *or* after each comma or, more conventionally, after the final comma only:

The new job-holder will:

- develop a set of guidelines for clean wastepaper recycling
- introduce green bins for clean wastepaper at appropriate places, or
- monitor compliance with departmental targets.

Alternatively you could use this kind of set-up, which stresses the *or*:



The new job-holder will:

- develop a set of guidelines for clean wastepaper recycling
- or
- introduce green bins for clean wastepaper at appropriate places
- or
- monitor compliance with departmental targets.

You will rarely want to continue a sentence beyond a list as this could overburden the reader's short-term memory. But if you do so, your final listed item should end with a comma and the sentence should continue with a lower-case letter:

The new job-holder will:

- develop a set of guidelines for clean wastepaper recycling
- introduce green bins for clean wastepaper at appropriate places, and
- monitor compliance with departmental targets,

but the work must always take place within existing budgetary limits.

**The second part of the standard** applies to listed items that are complete statements (e.g. sentences, note-form text). These may take context from the platform statement but don't need it for meaning. They should begin with a capital and end with a full stop, like this:

The speaker made three points:

- Aboriginal people across the world have been persecuted in the name of civilization and religion.
- Even so-called enlightened governments have broken treaties made in good faith by aboriginals.
- Despair among aboriginals may lead to their cultural disintegration or uprisings against authority.

This treatment is particularly useful when a listed item is long and detailed, perhaps with several separate sentences, as it seems odd when the listed item begins with a lower-case letter and goes on with a new sentence.

The two-part standard above differs from that given in early editions of this book, which used more semicolons at the end of listed items. This is because people seem to prefer the cleaner, more informal look that comes from using less punctuation in vertical lists. In legal documents, though, some feel it gives more certainty to use semicolons after all items in the first part of the standard. So a typical legal list would be:

The tenant must:

- keep the garden and communal areas tidy and free of rubbish;
- pay the rent on time; and
- allow our staff to enter the property without notice in an emergency.

### Numbering the listed items

There's no need to number the listed items if you or the reader won't need to refer to them again or if you wish to avoid suggesting that the items are in priority order. Instead, just use a dash followed by a space, or use a bullet •.

Other options are arabic numbers (1, 2, 3) or bracketed letters (a), (b), (c) or, as a last resort, bracketed roman numerals (i), (ii), (iii). Roman numerals can be used if you need to put a list within a list—more common in legal documents than in everyday writing:

The court may in an order made by it in relation to a regulated agreement include provisions:

- (a) making the operation of any term of the order conditional on the doing of specified acts by any party;
- (b) suspending the operation of any term of the order:
  - (i) until the court subsequently directs; or
  - (ii) until the occurrence of a specified act or omission.

### Seeing the possibility for vertical lists

Sometimes the only method of enlivening and clarifying a piece of dreary text is a vertical list, so you need to be alert to the possibility.

The following example is the first part of a local authority's information leaflet to students explaining whether they are entitled to some money:

### **Maintenance grants when studying abroad**

#### *Students of modern languages*

A student of modern languages is defined by the regulations as a student whose course 'includes the study of one or more modern languages other than English for not less than half of the time spent studying the course and which includes periods of residence in a country whose language is a main language of the course'.

This seems at first to be beyond improvement—it's almost a straight quote from a regulation so a paraphrase may have unwanted results. Yet if you examine it from the reader's viewpoint, hope begins to emerge. You can see it should focus not on what the regulations say but on how they affect the student. Also, *includes* is used twice, suggesting that a vertical list is possible. Using these levers, you can personalize the information, switch it into question-and-answer style, and introduce a list. Through a bit of trial and error, you can produce something like this before getting your in-house lawyer to check it for accuracy:

### **Maintenance grants when studying abroad**

#### *Who can get a maintenance grant?*

You can get a grant if you are a student of modern languages. According to the regulations, this means your course must include both:

- the study of one or more modern languages (except English) for at least half the course time, and
- periods of residence in a country whose language is a main language of the course.

# 9

## Converting negative to positive

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**GUIDELINE** *Put your points positively when you can.*

---

‘You’ve got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative,’ according to the Johnny Mercer song popularized by Bing Crosby in the 1940s. Negatives include *un-* words like *unnecessary* and *unless*; verbs with negative associations like *avoid* and *undo*; and obvious ones like *not*, *no*, *except*, *less than*, *not less than*, and *not more than*. When readers are faced with a negative, they must first imagine the positive alternative, and then mentally cancel it out. So when a newspaper declares:

It is surely less painful to be unemployed if one is not sober, drug-free and filled with a desire to work

or when a gardening leaflet advises novice growers:

Do not assume that if the weather is not warm the soil is not dry

readers have to work hard to get the meaning. It’s beyond me, and probably most other people.

A single negative is unlikely to cause difficulty, though many a British voter used to pause, pencil poised, when confronted with the polling-booth instruction:

Vote for not more than one candidate.

instead of the plainer and positive:

Vote for one candidate only.

Now that the latter sentence is finally in common use, there's rejoicing in the streets.

When several negatives lurk in the same sentence, meaning may become obscure, as in this note from a lawyer to his client, an underwriter:

Underwriters are, we consider, free to form the view that James Brothers have **not yet proved** to their satisfaction that the short-landed bags were **not discharged** from the ship, and were **not lost** in transit between Antwerp and Dieppe, when they were **not covered** by this insurance policy.

—a rodeo ride during which perhaps only the lawyer who created it could stay in the saddle. The going is almost as tough in this pension contract:

'Dependent relative' includes a member's child or adopted child who has **not attained** the age of 18 or has **not ceased** to receive full-time education or training.

Put positively this would say:

'Dependent relative' includes a member's child or adopted child who is **aged 17 or under** or **is in** full-time education or training.

Just as *at least* is a good alternative to *not less than*, the word *only*—which is positive but restrictive—can usefully convert negative to positive:

The government will not consent to an application if people with a legal interest in the common land object to the application, except in exceptional circumstances.

*Not* and *except* both vanish under the influence of *only*:

**Only** in exceptional circumstances will the government consent to an application if people with a legal interest in the common land object to it.

or

If people with a legal interest in the common land object to an application, the government will consent to it **only** in exceptional circumstances.

The following note was sent to the parents of a child with special needs (learning difficulties) by a local education authority:

It is unusual for us not to be able to find a place for a child with special needs in one of our schools.

People can easily misinterpret the double negative as a single negative and think it means *We cannot usually find*, especially if they are used to getting negative replies from authority figures. The intended meaning, of course, is positive:

We can usually find a place for a child with special needs in one of our schools.

Some ombudsmen and tribunals are among those addicted to elaborate negativity:

- **I see no reason why the firm should not require properly prepared supporting bills.**

(Meaning: 'It is reasonable for the firm to ask you for proper receipts.')

- **The authority's actions do not appear to be unreasonable in the circumstances.**

(Meaning: 'The authority seems to have acted reasonably.')

- **It is difficult to say what, if any, difference this information would have made to the councillors' assessment of your request. However, I do not believe I can safely say that it would definitely have made no difference.**

(Meaning: 'I do not know whether this information would have affected the councillors' assessment, but it might have done.')

- **Having reviewed the application, the Board is not of the view that there is no reasonable likelihood that the applicants can establish a violation of the Act based on the allegations they have made in the application. Accordingly, the request by the responding party to dismiss this application at this stage is hereby dismissed.**

(Which seems to mean: 'The Board has reviewed the application. It has decided that the applicants are reasonably likely to be able to establish an Act violation based on their allegations in the application. The Board therefore dismisses the request by the responding party to dismiss the application. So the application stands.')

Clearly there can be a difference between an action being *not unreasonable* and just plain *reasonable*. But always ask yourself whether such distinctions are worth making in the particular case; often, they just seem piffling and lawyerly.

Negative words sometimes obscure a positive message. Here, a housing company is writing to local residents:

Although we have developed alternatives where traditional residents associations are not well supported, four well-run and representative associations are active and continue to receive our support at Halfwood, Sockam, Haig Green and West Evesham.

—which could be put more positively as:

We continue to support four active, well-run, and representative residents associations at Halfwood, Sockam, Haig Green, and West Evesham. In other areas, fewer local people have got involved in residents groups, so we have developed alternatives.

And words like *unless* and *unlikely*, if overused, cast such a pall of gloom they encourage readers to despair:

Unless you are qualified it is unlikely that you will be able to offer professional support.

That sentence may mean, a bit more cheerfully:

To offer this kind of paid support, you will usually need to be professionally qualified.

Rules from the European Commission are a fertile source of multiple negatives, as in this 67-word sentence from, ironically, a regulation on public access to documents (EC1049/2001):

Even though it is neither the object nor the effect of this Regulation to amend national legislation on access to documents, it is nevertheless clear that, by virtue of the principle of loyal cooperation which governs relations between the institutions and the Member States, Member States should take care not to hamper the proper application of this Regulation and should respect the security rules of the institutions.

—which, with fewer negatives and a vertical list, could become:

This Regulation does not amend or seek to amend national legislation on access to documents. Yet the principle of loyal cooperation that governs relations between the institutions and the Member States means that Member States should:

- (a) take care not to hamper the proper application of this Regulation; and
- (b) respect the security rules of the institutions.

Some uses for negatives

Negatives are, of course, useful. Many commands are more powerful in the negative, which is why they have a place in procedures and instruction manuals. Even a sentence with two negatives like:

Do not switch on the power unless you have made all the necessary checks

is probably more forceful than:

Only switch on the power when you have made the necessary checks.

Negatives also contribute to the rich vein of sardonic wit in the British character. Oscar Wilde, for example, described fox hunters as ‘the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable’, while Winston Churchill is reputed to have said that one of his most successful generals, Field Marshal Montgomery, was ‘in defeat unbeatable; in victory unbearable’.

But avoid overusing negatives if clarity is the aim, and ensure that those you use are necessary.



# 10

## Using good punctuation

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**GUIDELINE** *Put accurate punctuation at the centre of your writing.*

---

Punctuation shouldn't cause as much fear as it does. Only about a dozen marks need to be mastered and the guidelines are fairly simple. You can buy a cheap lesson on punctuation in the daily newspapers, where 99 per cent of it will conform to the advice given here. You'll also see the full range of marks because journalists—especially the star columnists—use far more colons, semicolons, and dashes than business and official writers.

The rumour has got about that any old punctuation, or none at all, will do. This is as bad as saying that any old words in any old order will do, as long as readers get the drift. A good command of punctuation helps you express yourself more interestingly and precisely, and be understood at first reading. It's an essential part of the toolkit—utterly complementary to choosing the right words.

Consider these statements:

Father to be attacked on waste land [headline].

Once she had the dress off she would go in search of matching accessories.

Without good punctuation they can be interpreted in different ways, distracting the readers and causing them to stop and backtrack. Punctuation fixes the meaning and smooths the path:

Father-to-be attacked on waste land.

Once she had the dress, off she would go in search of matching accessories.

Punctuation shows how words and strings of words are related, separated, and emphasized, so its main purpose is to help readers

interpret the sentence. A lesser purpose is to act as a substitute for the devices we all use in speech, such as pausing and altering pitch. But the widespread notion that you should use a comma where you'd have a one-beat pause in speech, a semicolon for a two-beat pause, and a full stop for a three-beat pause is unhelpful because it can be interpreted in too many ways. Even so, you may want to read a sentence aloud to help you decide how to punctuate it.

This chapter describes the standards most careful writers apply, but few people will ever agree on the position of every comma and full stop. So if you're editing someone's writing, be prepared for a bit of give and take.

Today, even careful writers must accept that fine distinctions between such marks as colons and semicolons will be foreign to many of their readers. Yet so long as readers regard a semicolon as a funny-looking comma and a colon as a bit like a full stop, they'll usually have enough to cling on to. So, even if you decide to use the less common punctuation marks sparingly when writing for a mass audience, there's no need to remove them altogether.

After a period when the teaching of punctuation seemed unfashionable in some British schools, children in the early twenty-first century are again learning the main rules. From the age of 6 or 7, they're also reading books showing a wide range of marks, as in *The Green Cushion* by Margaret Joy:

'Let me think,' said Old Joey. 'Charlie from the chippy took one. Mrs Tomkins took one—she lives over at number nineteen; and Miss Wilson took the third one—she lives opposite at Rose Villa.'

The points in this chapter apply to British English. Where US English differs, I've mentioned it, but you may also wish to check a good US guide such as *Garner's Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 2016).

## Full stop (.)

The main use of a full stop (US: *period*) is to show where a sentence ends. For this reason, full stops should be the most common mark on the page.

There's no need to use full stops in people's names or in abbreviations or acronyms—Mr J C Bennett, BBC, US, eg, ie, 8am, 9pm—unless

there's a genuine chance of ambiguity or you are following a style manual that says otherwise. (Oxford style is to use full stops in *e.g.* and *i.e.*, so this book follows it.) Headings in a report, letter, email, or memo don't need a final full stop. If a sentence ends with a website address, it's common to omit the full stop in case people think the stop is part of the address; but there's no more reason to do this than with a postal address.

## Comma (,)

Using a comma where a full stop or semicolon is mandatory is one of the commonest errors in business and official English. It causes readers to stop and backtrack, and may create ambiguity. See *Semicolon* for more about this.

**Single commas** act as separators between parts of a sentence:

Using accident and ill-health data and drawing upon my experience of inspecting slaughterhouses and meat-processing plants, I have prepared a list of hazards found in the meat industry.

or

Although suitable protective equipment was available, most of the operatives were not wearing it.

or

If you send the documents by Thursday, we'll complete the sale by the following Monday.

Be sparing with commas. Using them every few words may prevent the reader understanding how the sentence is constructed. This, for example, is a mess:

I have tried on a number of occasions to contact you at your office, without success and now resort, to writing to you, as these items should be dealt with urgently. You will appreciate the possible problems involved, if these units become occupied, before we have had a chance to check for their compliance with standards, and I would be obliged, if you could respond, by complying with my inspector's original request for compliance, as any further delay, could result in the start of disciplinary action against your company.

Almost every comma is redundant and the 58-word final sentence could be split using the techniques in chapter 3.

A **pair of commas** may cordon off information that is an aside, explanation, or addition. Readers can, if they wish, leapfrog the cordoned-off area and still make sense of what is said:

Holmes, having searched for further clues, left by the back door.

Often the position of commas will alter the meaning or emphasis, so be careful:

The girls, who will join the team next week, are fine players for their age.

Here, the information between the commas comments on *the girls*, but is not essential to the main point of the sentence, which is that the girls are fine players. This kind of insert is called a **commenting clause**. Compare this, without commas:

The girls who will join the team next week are fine players for their age.

Obviously the emphasis has changed: the words *who will join the team next week* now help to define the girls. They are essential to our understanding of what kind of people they are. This is a **defining clause** and does not need a comma cordon.

Commas are helpful in separating listed items:

Staple foods include rice, wheat, sorghum and millet.

No comma is needed after *sorghum* (though such a **serial comma** is usual in US English and also forms part of the Oxford style used in this book); but when the penultimate or final listed item includes *and*, a comma in the right place can help the reader to see the meaning immediately:

To get an award, you must obtain a pass on theory, practical knowledge and application, and health and safety.

A comma can also help to create special effects like suspense. Compare:

They crept into the room and found the body.

with:

They crept into the room, and found the body.

Finally, ignore the advice sometimes heard on writing-skills courses: 'Use a maximum of one comma per sentence.' It's bonkers.

## Colon (:

A colon has many jobs. It's used to introduce direct speech as an alternative to a comma; and to separate a main heading from a subtitle, as in *Floorboards: the unvarnished truth*. Colons have three other important purposes:

- 1 To **introduce a vertical list** (as in the line above) or a running-text list where there is a substantial break after the introductory phrase, such as:  
She has several positive characteristics: courage, dignity, and stickability.

For the best way to punctuate vertical lists, see chapter 8.

- 2 To **act as a drum roll** (a mark of announcement) or a **why-because marker** that leads the reader from one idea to its consequence or logical continuation, for example:

There's one big problem with tennis on radio: you can't see it.

- 3 Much more rarely, to **separate two sharply contrasting and parallel statements** as in the example always quoted in punctuation guides, 'Man proposes: God disposes.' Here's a more secular colon:

During Wimbledon, television is like someone with a reserved ticket: radio is the enthusiast who has queued all night to get in.

In all these uses, the colon will usually follow a statement that could be a complete sentence. After the colon the sentence will usually continue with a lower-case letter, though a capital is common in American English.

A colon does not need support from a dash (:-). This nameless mark is outdated, unacceptable to most publishers, and looks repulsive because the dash usually cuddles up to the higher dot, except in

professional typesetting. It continues to have a zombie existence as an emoticon.

## Semicolon (;)

Consider these sentences from a notice next to an ancient cathedral clock:

The large oak frame houses the striking train of gears, these parts have been painted black and are the early parts of the clock. In this same frame on the left between two posts is a going train (a time piece), this has been painted green.

Both commas are wrong and should be semicolons or full stops. To use semicolons safely—ignoring for the moment their use in lists—you need to **satisfy two criteria at once**:

- 1 The statements separated by the semicolons could stand alone as separate sentences.
- 2 The topics mentioned in the two statements are closely related.

So the paragraph should say:

The large oak frame houses the striking train of gears; these parts have been painted black and are the early parts of the clock. In this same frame on the left between two posts is a going train (a time piece); this has been painted green.

Confusion between semicolons and commas is widespread and has even afflicted the secretariat of 10 Downing Street (the UK prime minister's office). When Labour took power in 1997, there was concern about the fate of Humphrey, the resident cat, as the prime minister's wife was thought to dislike cats. An artist tried to find the truth by offering to paint the animal, and received this reply in which all three commas are wrong because they stand between full sentences:

Thank you for your recent letter addressed to the Prime Minister, I have been asked to reply. Your portfolio of pen portraits was very impressive, however we already have a portrait of Humphrey hanging on the walls of the Cabinet Office. An artist sent it in two years ago, she copied his likeness from press photographs.

These run-on sentences need separation by full stops or semicolons. One way would be:

Thank you for your recent letter addressed to the Prime Minister. I have been asked to reply. Your portfolio of pen portraits was very impressive; however, we already have a portrait of Humphrey hanging on the walls of the Cabinet Office. An artist sent it in two years ago; she copied his likeness from press photographs.

Another way would be to adjust the sentence boundaries by adding a few words:

Your portfolio of pen portraits was very impressive but we already have a portrait of Humphrey hanging on the walls of the Cabinet Office. An artist sent it in two years ago, having copied his likeness from press photographs.

By the way, all this talk of *Humphrey hanging* may sound sinister but soon after the letter was written the black-and-white mouser was merely pensioned off on ill-health grounds and lived a long retirement in South London.

A semicolon can often seem less curt than a full stop. Instead of starting a letter:

Thank you for your letter of 10 December. We apologize for the delay in replying.  
—it would sound more relaxed to write:

Thank you for your letter of 10 December; we apologize for the delay in replying.

A comma would be wrong in that position because it cannot sustain such a long break—rarely is a comma enough to separate complete sentences.

Make sure you satisfy the twin criteria above for the correct use of semicolons. In this example from a business brochure, the semicolon is wrong (it should be a comma) because the first clause from *While to role* could not stand alone as a sentence:

While each one of these products does indeed superbly fulfil its own specific role; we know that understanding our customers and delivering exactly what they want is just as important.

Semicolons can be used instead of commas **to separate items in a list**, especially where the items have their own commas:

Lunch at Henry's comprised all the ingredients for a happy and contented life: wine from the grapes of Tuscany; tropical avocados, seductively soft and yielding; French king prawns, clothed in a luscious sauce; a multitude of meaty snacks for carnivores and nutty nibbles for vegetarians; and the company of all the beautiful people of the town.

In a long, catalogue-type list, semicolons are ideal dividers:

Target audiences for the new manual will include other companies in our group, both European and US-based; business leaders, top politicians and other leading opinion-formers; consultants of proven expertise; and local schools and colleges.

To use merely commas as dividers would produce chaos because commas already exist within some of the listed items. An introductory colon after *include* would be unnecessary—there's no substantial pause at that point, unlike in the *Lunch at Henry's* example.

Dash (—)

Dashes are sometimes used **singly** to indicate the start of an aside, explanation, or addition:

Justifying their case, smokers introduce a herring so red that it glows like coal: that if their illnesses are self-inflicted, well, so are most people's – look at traffic accidents, look at potholers.

They can add emphasis, too:

He shot big game for status, pleasure – and greed.

When used **in pairs**, dashes draw special attention to the phrase they surround (compare *Brackets*):

Visitors may stay overnight – or for as long as they wish – in the hostelry run by the friars.

A pair of commas or a pair of brackets would have done just as well, but the dashes emphasize the point.



It's all right to use more than one pair of dashes in a sentence but take care the meaning doesn't disintegrate. Here's an awkward, if playful, use of two pairs of dashes by a *Times* columnist:

Volkswagen is in trouble – terrible trouble – very terrible trouble, and we can sit on the sidelines – entry free – and bask in somebody else's trouble for hours on end.

Perhaps he should have read his paper's own guide on the subject of dashes which, happily, the journalists ignore:

Dashes are sloppy punctuation, ugly in narrow columns of newspaper type. They often indicate that a sentence is badly constructed and needs rewriting.

In word processing (typing on computer), it is customary to use a hyphen with a space either side. For a more professional look in typesetting or desktop publishing, most authors use a **spaced en rule**, as in the Volkswagen example above. The en rule (or en dash) is not obvious on most keyboards but may be an option under the hyphen key. On a PC keyboard, press Ctrl- on the number pad.

Some publishers, including Oxford, use an **unspaced em rule** (or em dash)—which is slightly longer than the en rule—for all the purposes described above, as happens in this book. An **unspaced en rule** is also often used to show a range of dates or other figures, e.g. *1958–2004* or *rats aged 6–9 months were used in the experiment*.

### Square brackets [ ]

Square brackets (US: *brackets*) show that the text within does not belong to the document or quotation but is being inserted for clarity:

He [Mr Smith] told me to go home.  
They saw it [the pheasant] as fair game.

### Brackets ( )

Brackets (also called *round brackets* or, in the US, *parentheses*) surround an aside, explanation, or addition that is relatively unimportant to the main text (compare *Dash*):

The biker fell off at 160 mph, suffering an open fracture of his tibia (lower leg) and losing two inches of bone in the process. Only ten years ago, four out of ten open tibial fractures (in which the bone comes partially out of the leg) resulted in amputation.

Well-placed brackets—e.g. for explanations—can prevent the meaning of a sentence disintegrating, even if the result looks cluttered:

The problem is tidal flooding along the river. Many plans have been studied but the agreed solution is a system of river mattressing (to avoid breaches) and embankment raising (to avoid exceptionally high-tide flooding).

If a sentence begins within a bracket, it should start with a capital and end with a full stop inside the bracket. A comma should rarely precede a bracket but to aid understanding there's no harm in putting one after a closing bracket.

If you're going to use an acronym several times and the reader is unlikely to know what it means, spell it out on the first occasion and put the acronym in brackets:

Agency Services Limited (ASL) has tendered for the work.

Other types of bracket are **brace or curly brackets** {which are used in maths} and **angle brackets** <used in linguistics, other specialisms, and Web addresses>.

## Capitals

Capital letters (upper case) defy any would-be rule-maker, as some decisions on whether to dignify a word with an initial capital have to be left to the individual writer. Use them sparingly though, and err on the side of lower case. Writing afflicted with random capitalitis looks silly:

Please Complete One Line For Each Person Normally Living At This Address, including those who are temporarily living away. Include Everybody – Yourself, All Adults, whether entered or not on the Electoral Registration form, All Younger Persons, Children, and Babies.

Headings in business and scientific reports tend to suffer from the same disease, with writers making invidious distinctions between words they capitalize and words they don't. Compare the distracting:

Factors that May Affect the Success of the Strategy

with

Factors that may affect the success of the strategy

In the US, headings in books often use **title case**, where the initial letters of nouns and adjectives (and sometimes even verbs) are capitalized. Title case spills over into reports and letters and, under the influence of Microsoft Word, is often seen in British documents. It lends a self-important air, especially when applied to all the subheadings as well as chapter or section headings. It also gives an inconsistent look because words in lower case in the main text suddenly assume a higher status in headings. The world may yet be saved from the horrors of title case if enough authors and publishers rebel and use **sentence case**, as in this book.

**People:** Use an initial capital for ranks and titles when attached to a person's name, thus *Prince William* but *the prince*, *President Trump* but *the president*, *Judge Wright* but *the judge*. Offices of state in the UK such as *home secretary* and *chancellor of the exchequer* are lower case in *The Economist* and the *Sunday Times*, but confusingly become *Home Secretary* and *Chancellor of the Exchequer* in *The Times*. I prefer lower case for them. Titles that look odd in lower case need capitalizing, hence *Master of the Rolls*, *Lord Chief Justice*. In some organizations, job titles like *managing director* and *housing manager* are given initial capitals but this is poor practice—at what rank do you stop? It helps if the organization issues a style guide stating its house rules on this. Beneath the signature in a letter, job titles in lower case look odd so it's reasonable to use title case for them there (but only there).

**Organizations and government departments** generally take initial capitals only when their full name or something similar is used. Thus *Metropolitan Police* but *the police*; *County Court* and *Court of Appeal* but *the court*; *St John's Church* but *the church*. Because it helps to distinguish between an Act of Parliament (a statute) and an act of parliament (something done by parliament), upper case is better for the statute. A newspaper would usually print *Blankshire District Council* but *the council*. The council itself, however, might prefer to use a capital *c* whenever it referred to itself. Confusion sets in when it then refers to another council, to which it will invariably give a lower-case letter. The result is an apparent inconsistency, and the main merit of a general preference for lower case is that it tends to produce a much more consistent-looking text.

**Trade names** take upper case: *Hoover* but *vacuum cleaner*, *Xerox* but *photocopier*, *Penbritin* but *ampicillin*.

**Names of wars and historical periods** normally take an initial capital: *Iron Age fort*, *Vietnam War*.

**Acronyms** usually take all capitals: *BBC*, *EU*, *USA*, *TUC*, *FBI*. Oxford style for acronyms that can be spoken as words is also all capitals: *NATO*, *UNICEF*, and *UNESCO*. Most newspapers use *Nato*, *Unicef*, and *Unesco*.

## Hyphen (-)

Hyphens make links. For example, they link words that form a composite adjective before a noun: *computer-based work*, *short-term goals*, *half-inch nail*, *three-year-old child*, *out-of-hours work*, *low-power-consuming light-emitting diodes*, *pre-judicial career*, *no-go area*, and *couldn't-care-less attitude*. This kind of hyphenation helps reduce ambiguities and miscues.

The presence or absence of a hyphen can easily change the meaning. Compare:

The pop group reformed **with** The pop group re-formed.

The atrium has no smoking areas **with** The atrium has no-smoking areas.

A cross party spokesman **with** A cross-party spokesman.

The partnership was disrupted by extra marital sex **with** The partnership was disrupted by extra-marital sex.

There are no good lawyers in that firm **with** There are no-good lawyers in that firm.

Sometimes, to save space, hyphens are left hanging separated from their companion words, as in this sentence from *The Times* where *free* is omitted after *wheat-* and *yeast-*:

A typical day's intake for me would include oat bran porridge for breakfast, flavoured with maple syrup, five wheat-, yeast- and sugar-free oatcakes midmorning, baked potato, olive oil and salad for lunch, and hot vegetable stock at intervals until evening.

If you were writing for a less-literate audience, that kind of unusual punctuation would be best avoided. But a hanging hyphen is clearly needed in this extract from a business proposal:

Normally on oil and gas related enquiries, a briefing meeting is convened at the client's request.

*Gas related* comes before *enquiries* and is effectively one word, so it needs a hyphen. But there are oil-related enquiries too in the sentence, because *related* is implied after *oil*. So the sentence should say, with a hyphen hanging after *oil*:

Normally on oil- and gas-related enquiries, a briefing meeting is convened at the client's request.

or

Normally on oil-related and gas-related enquiries, a briefing meeting is convened at the client's request.

You can see the hanging hyphen and other correct hyphenations in this extract from the *Left-Handed Embroiderer's Companion* (2010), where Yvette Stanton writes:

The difference between what left- and right-handed stitchers do involves holding the needle and inserting it in the fabric comfortably. Right-handers generally have

their needle in their right hand, inserting it from right to left. Left-handers hold their needle in their left hand, inserting it from left to right.

It's difficult to use hyphens consistently, and there's usually someone to disagree with your best efforts. The treasurer of the World Pheasant Association might be peering over your shoulder, as in this extract from a newspaper letter:

[Your] article... refers to the endangered 'white-eared pheasant'... The hyphen is incorrect. The pheasant in question is a white pheasant with ears. There are also blue eared pheasants and brown eared pheasants. The taxonomic similarity is that all the three pheasants have ears and all the ears are white.

When a woman was assaulted by a London taxi driver, a newspaper described the attacker as a *black cab driver*. But which was black, the driver or the cab? The paper had meant to say *black-cab driver*, leaving his skin colour out of the question. Had it really wanted to mention his colour, the paper could have written *black black-cab driver* or *white black-cab driver*, but perhaps then it would have decided to recast the sentence.

It's normally unnecessary to hyphenate when one of the words is an adverb (see chapter 11) ending in *-ly*: 'rapidly growing economy'; 'carefully crafted answer'—though some newspapers routinely do this.

Words with *self* should be hyphenated when they are nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or verbs: *self-esteem*, *self-employed*, *self-contained*, *self-centred*, *self-consciously*, *self-identify*, *self-assemble*. As *non-* is a hyphenated prefix, its hyphen is always present: *non-partisan*, *non-violent*, *non-qualifying*, *non-capital offering*, *non-aggression pact*, *non-aligned countries*. When attached to another adjective, *mid* always takes a hyphen: *mid-Victorian pottery*, *mid-ocean ridge*, *mid-engined vehicle*. A good dictionary will show which words are inherently hyphenated.

Some nouns formed by two or more words need hyphens: *set-up*, *set-to*, *run-up*, *build-up*, *free-for-all*, *call-out*, *punch-up*. Without a hyphen, there is ambiguity in sentences like:

Last week there was a bust up in the street.

where the possible meanings include *a fight* (a bust-up), *a drugs bust* (a police raid for illegal drugs), and *a sculpture*.

Verbs rarely need hyphenation. All three hyphens in this advertising leaflet are wrong, while a hyphen should have been included to create *high-street bargains*:

With inflation decreasing, the press and politicians are *spelling-out* the message that the recession is over... Now is the time to think about making cash available for the numerous high street bargains and to begin *paying-off* some of the commitments that have *built-up* in this tough period.

In those cases, *spelling out*, *paying off*, and *built up* are simply phrasal verbs (a verb followed by a particle). Verbs that do need hyphenating are usually compounds and are shown hyphenated in the dictionary, like to *fine-tune* a car, to *force-feed* a prisoner, to *fine-draw* two pieces of cloth, to *double-check* an answer, or to *copy-edit* some text.

## Apostrophe (')

The apostrophe is now so widely misused—an errant tadpole, one columnist calls it—that its eventual death seems inevitable. Alongside their no-smoking stickers, companies could soon declare themselves apostrophe-free zones. This would be a pity, as the correct use of apostrophes conveys meaning and prevents ambiguity.

The main rules on apostrophes are simple and cover more than 99 per cent of cases. They are about **possession** and **contraction**. The few exceptions are more difficult and have to be memorized.

### Possession

Follow a two-stage approach:

- First, find the possessor(s).
- Second, put an apostrophe immediately after the possessor(s).

For example, in:

The judges wig was eaten by the generals horse.

—admittedly, a rare event—it's clear that the judge possesses the wig and the general the horse, so the sentence becomes:

The judge's wig was eaten by the general's horse.

In:

The peoples leader ignored the childrens opinions.

—a more common occurrence—it's clear that the people possess the leader and the children the opinions. So the sentence—note carefully the position of the apostrophes, **immediately after the possessors**—becomes:

The people's leader ignored the children's opinions.

The same rule applies to such sentences as:

The three officials' cars were attacked and several players' houses were daubed with paint.

where the apostrophes go immediately after the possessors.

It's a little more complicated when the singular form of a word ends in *s*, but then you either add 's or just an apostrophe. Both these forms are correct:

I sent you *Mr Jones's* copy of the lease yesterday.

I sent you *Mr Jones'* copy of the lease yesterday.

Words that end in *ss* or *x*, like *boss*, *business*, or *fox*, also take 's in possession:

The *boss's* failure to act led to orders being lost.

A surreal, apostrophe-free message roams Britain on a fleet of lorries:

COLLECTING TOMORROWS DELIVERIES TODAY

As the *deliveries* belong to *tomorrow*, there should be an apostrophe between the *W* and *S*.

Even in hard cases such as the famous racehorse Big Buck's, saddled with an apostrophe almost from birth, the same possession rule applies. When the animal picked up a leg injury, the sports pages correctly said *Big Buck's' tendon will take months to heal*, the final apostrophe showing that the tendon belonged to Big Buck's. Such quirks give many people hours of harmless pleasure.



## Contractions

Use an apostrophe to show that at least one letter is missing:

Today's the day for a fresh start (*Today is...*)

It's no concern of mine (*It is...*)

Doesn't anybody have the results? (*Does not...*)

Remember that pronouns—words in place of nouns—like *his, hers, ours, yours, theirs*, and *its* don't need apostrophes. They are words in their own right—no letters are missing and the possession is built into the word. (The only exception is *one's*, as in *one's head is aching*.) So it would be correct to write:

The cat wandered in, its wet paws patterning the carpet.

Though the wet paws belong to the cat, there's no apostrophe in *its* because the possession is built into the word. Only write *it's* when the word is short for *it is* or *it has*. This means that all the following examples, from an otherwise fine walking guide to Malmesbury, Wiltshire, are wrong: *it's beauty*; *it's graceful interlaced arcading*; *it's charming cottages*; *it's story*; *it's name*.

In some expressions of measurement and time, apostrophes are conventional:

They took a week's holiday without permission and the firm then gave them two weeks' notice.

It's difficult at first to see the logic in this, but in the first example *holiday* in a sense belongs to the *week*. Without the apostrophe it would say *a weeks holiday*, which would mix a singular *a* with a plural-looking *weeks*. So, if it's logical to write *a week's holiday*, you should move the apostrophe along one letter when the possessor ends in *s*, as in *two weeks' notice*. Whatever the logic, though, this is becoming extinct, with even the more careful newspapers omitting the apostrophe from time to time and big advertisers like banks and car makers doing so routinely.

Generally, don't use an apostrophe in a plural: *In the 1990s, people made more, spent more, and saved less* unless there's possession: *Six*

*MPs' offices were ransacked.* Refuse to be led astray by any shop notice proclaiming: *Shrimp's, prawns', pears', orange's, and sandwich'es.* These are all straightforward plurals—no apostrophe is needed. Sometimes an exception to the rule is demanded by the need to avoid ambiguity. So, in my opinion:

Mind your p's and q's  
A list of do's and don'ts  
The aardvark has three a's in its name.

—are preferable to:

Mind your ps and qs  
A list of dos and don'ts  
The aardvark has three as in its name.

Occasionally you meet a rarity where at first the apostrophe looks superfluous: *Maria's lasagne was better than the chef's.* Clearly the lasagne belongs to Maria, so the first apostrophe is fine. But what belongs to the chef to deserve an apostrophe? Lasagne, again, because that word is implied. The same thing happens with some shop names. *Lewis's* in Liverpool means the shop belonging to Lewis.

In some cases, an apostrophe might seem appropriate but is unnecessary. If you call something a *Collectors Handbook*, you could argue it's a handbook *for* collectors not *belonging* to them, so no apostrophe is needed. The same could be true of *cashiers office*, and may explain why the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux had no apostrophe in its name—the bureaux did not *belong* to citizens, they were *for* citizens to use. Its new name, Citizens Advice, follows the same principle. In *six weeks pregnant*, an apostrophe isn't needed because *pregnant* is an adjective and there's no possession. The same applies to *six weeks late*.

A final point: many keyboards hide true apostrophes and curly quotation marks but seductively offer instant access to the marks for feet (') and inches ("). Seek out the proper marks—they'll usually be hidden under another key, and they'll look better on the page. Even

simpler is to adjust your software settings to give **smart quotes**, so that you'll get true apostrophes and quotation marks that face the right way.

### Ellipsis (...)

The ellipsis has two main purposes:

- 1 To show that material is missing from a quotation (or that part of a text is missing or illegible), e.g. 'The traditional texts of the Hindu religion...state that the priests are paid in gold.' The omitted words here are 'the sacred *Vedas*'.
- 2 To indicate suspense, e.g. 'The 2016 Olympic Games will be held in...Rio de Janeiro!'

There should be three full stops in the ellipsis. If it ends a complete sentence, the ellipsis is followed by a fourth full stop.

In desktop publishing, authors seem to prefer a word space before and after the triple stop, which is also the Oxford standard. In this case if the ellipsis closes a complete sentence, a fourth full stop should be shown, preferably set tight on the third.

As in so many things linguistic, consistency is hard to achieve. For several pages about ellipses, see *New Hart's Rules*, the style guide favoured by many publishers.

### Quotation marks (' ') or ( ' ' )

These, also called quotes, quote marks, speech marks, or inverted commas, indicate the opening and closing of direct speech:

'There's no good alternative so we will go on as before,' said the president.

Or, if a sentence ends after the first statement:

'No other policy will work,' said the president. 'Tomorrow we will continue as we did today.'

Note that in both cases the comma comes *within* the closing quote in British and US English. The logic of this is easy enough to remember, as the comma is placed where an exclamation mark or question mark

would be placed if needed. But what if the speaker had said: ‘Quite simply, there is no alternative so we will go on as before’—which includes a comma—and you wanted to put the reporting verb *said* after *simply*? Then conventionally you’d do it like this, placing the spoken comma **outside** the quote mark in British English (**inside** it in US English):

‘Quite simply’, said the president, ‘there is no alternative so we will go on as before.’

Defying the convention, most British newspapers and novels place the comma within the quote mark in all direct speech. This is much easier for authors to remember and I’ve never done it any other way myself. Of course, by repositioning the reporting verb you can avoid the difficulty entirely.

Most books and newspapers use single quote marks for direct speech, reserving double quotes for a quotation within a quotation. However, the reverse is acceptable, is widespread in children’s books, and is standard style in the US.

Quote marks are also used to clothe a word in irony or, usually unnecessarily, to apologize for some clumsy or supposedly colloquial usage:

I have been ‘toying’ with the idea of buying a plasma TV and wondered if you were going to sell them.

In this first phase I also ‘touched base’ with other interested people.

Quote marks are common when drawing attention to the first use of a technical term:

This kind of score is known as the ‘median’.

When quoting a full sentence from another source, put your closing full stop inside the closing quote mark:

We finally understood how a missing comma could alter meaning when the tutor wrote on the board ‘Let’s eat Grandma.’

When quoting a sentence fragment, the closing full stop goes outside the closing quote mark:

He told us to ‘get a life’ and ‘pay less attention to punctuation and more to growing the business’.

Just to confuse things, in US English that final quote mark would go *outside* the full stop. Also in US English, if quoted items in a list each need to be followed by a comma, the commas come *inside* the quote marks in a style that looks odd to British eyes:

Naturally the telemarketer must be prepared for all possible answers like “in the morning,” “on weekends,” “after midnight,” or “between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m.”

### Exclamation mark (!)

Use this to follow expressions of surprise, shock, or dismay—but sparingly and singly. Perhaps it’s harsh to say that the multiple screamer, such as the *!!!* much used in social-media posts, means ‘Idiot at work’, but it always looks like hype. Don’t use the mark to signal a witticism or acute observation, as this not only deprives readers of the pleasure of noticing it for themselves, but suggests they are too slow to see it without your help.

### Question mark (?)

Use this after direct questions. There’s no need for one if the question is really a polite demand:

Will you please let me have your reply by 6pm today.

Would you please confirm who will be signing on the bank’s behalf.

In informal writing, a bracketed question mark is useful for drawing attention, perhaps facetiously, to irony or to a doubtful claim:

His department is addicted to cutting-edge (?) technology.



## Using good grammar

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**GUIDELINE** Use good grammar, but relax—you don't need to know hundreds of grammatical terms.

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In the Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), Carly Simon sings: 'Nobody does it better ... Nobody does it half as good as you.' Shocking grammar! Everybody knows it should be 'Half as *well* as you', because that's standard English. But songwriters don't always—or even often—apply standard English because—rather like plain English—it's few people's mother tongue. Many only use it for formal purposes.

Let's not fear the grammar of standard English, though. All of us muddle along with it, we're all learning, and we all make mistakes. In case of need, there are plenty of websites, books, and software programs that can help.

A little grammatical knowledge goes a long way. To write reasonably well, you don't need much more than the grammar that's taught in England's state primary schools after the reforms introduced in 2013 sought to raise standards. And most adults, I guess, can already answer correctly questions like these which all 11-year-olds now face in an explicit grammar test:

- Circle the word that describes **how** William played on the field: 'William played badly on the field.' Ans: *badly*.
- Complete the sentence with a **contraction** that makes sense: 'If you give me the recipe ... buy the ingredients on the way home.' Ans: *I'll* or *we'll*.
- Put the baker's words into **direct speech**: 'The baker said he hoped to sell all the bread by lunchtime.' Ans: *I hope to sell...*

It's good to know a few grammatical terms if only to get the most from books like this. So this chapter gives a brief glossary of the terms in most common use, and closes with some sentences that include typical grammatical errors likely to make readers stumble and backtrack. If you'd like to dig deeper—and perhaps learn about such extreme grammar as *fronted adverbials*, *split digraphs*, *phonemes*, and *determiners*—you can download some free study sheets for teachers of 'key stage 1–2' children (aged 5–11) from, for example, <<https://printableworksheets.in>>

When reading the chapter, remember that many words change their grammatical character depending on their role in a sentence. So although *progress* is a noun in 'Next week we'll make better *progress* on the project', it can still be a verb in 'We'll *progress* if we work hard'.

**Adjective** A word of description. In 'For years, *local* residents have demanded *safer* streets', *local* and *safer* are adjectives describing their respective nouns.

**Adverb** Most adverbs end in *-ly* such as *certainly*, *quickly*, *sadly*, *probably*, but non *-ly* forms include *often*, *soon*, *away*. There are two types. First, *verb-phrase adverbs*, which say how the action in the verb takes place, such as the words in bold here: 'The politician **quietly** but **firmly** argued for more investment in the railways.' Second, *sentence adverbs*, which show the writer's attitude to what's being said: '**Understandably**, the workforce demanded higher pay.

**Unsurprisingly**, the owners refused.'

**Clause** A group of words, often not a complete sentence, containing such things as a doer and verb. There are two clauses in: 'If there were no bad people, there'd be no good lawyers.'

**Conjunction** A word that links two or more words, sentences, or clauses, for example *but*, *when*, *and*, *yet*, *if*, *although*.

**Contraction** A word with one or more letters missing and replaced by an apostrophe, for example: *don't* (do not), *won't* (will not), *haven't* (have not), *can't* (cannot), *I'd* (I would or I should, or I had). In informal and semi-formal business writing, contractions can add a little conversational warmth. Unusual ones like *you'll* (you will),

*you've* (you have), *there'll* (there will), *there're* (there are), and *you'd* (you would or you had), will be difficult for people with very low literacy (see chapter 29) and may look odd in formal letters and reports.

**Doer** The person or thing doing the action, also known as the *agent*. In 'The writer signed the contract', *writer* is the doer.

**Grammar** The body of rules and conventions by which words are grouped in a way that is meaningful to other people. For example, the sentence 'At dawn, the river look beautiful' is ungrammatical, if standard English is the criterion, as it breaks the rule that a singular doer (*river*) must govern a singular verb (*looks*). Non-standard English—widely used, for example, in popular song—may adopt different grammar for its own purposes. Bob Marley, the Jamaican reggae musician (1945–81), sang of his forebears: 'Pirates, yes they rob I/Sold I to the merchant ships/Minutes after they took I/From the bottomless pit.' Usage changes over time: Queen Victoria (1819–1901) wrote 'The news from France are very bad' because *news* was the accepted plural then. Grammar also changes from place to place: in British sports commentary, national and local teams tend to be plural—'England are winning 2–0'—while in Australian commentary, teams are usually singular. British soccer pundits, especially ex-players, rarely use standard past tenses of irregular verbs, so it's common to hear such forms as 'We was [read *were*] winning two-nil' and 'The keeper has came [read *come*] out for the ball and dropped it'.

**Imperative** The form of the verb that gives commands, for example: *go, eat, push, don't jump, let them go, let me see, don't be deceived*.

**Infinitive** The basic form of the verb, made up of *to* plus the verb word. Present-tense infinitives include *to go, to eat, to dream*. Past-tense infinitives include *to have gone, to have eaten, to have dreamt*. Passive-voice infinitives include *to be eaten, to be attacked*. See chapter 17 for *split infinitives*.

**Nominalization** A noun or noun phrase formed from a verb, for example *the preparation of* (from *to prepare*), *the renewal of* (from *to renew*). Also called a *zombie noun*. See chapter 7.



**Noun** A word that signifies a person, thing, place, activity, or quality, for example *axe, beacon, carrot, dam, editor, frill, gerbil, happiness*. Proper nouns are names of people, places, and the like: *Christmas, Canberra, Canada, Caroline* and usually take an initial capital.

**Object** The person or thing to which some action is done: 'We destroyed the *ship*.'

**Paragraph** A sentence or group of sentences separated in some way from the rest of the text and dealing with a particular part of the topic being discussed. It's sometimes regarded as a unit of thought.

**Participle** The present participle adds *-ing* to the verb, hence *going, finding, sleeping*. The past participle adds *-d* or *-ed* to most verbs, as in *worked, decided, starved*. See chapter 6 for the way other past participles are formed. A *hanging* or *dangling participle* is said to exist in sentences like this: 'Although generally frowned on, the landowner may request the quashing of a fixed parking notice at any time.' As *frowned* is the past participle of *frown*, traditional grammar requires it to agree with the nearest subject in the sentence, in this case the landowner. So it sounds as if the landowner is being frowned on, whereas the real meaning is that the quashing of fixed parking notices is frowned on. Because dangling participles create this kind of ambiguity, they are themselves generally frowned on. Sometimes, though, the ambiguity is more imagined than real as the context is so clear only a nit-picker would object.

**Particle** Many words can be *prepositions* and *adverb particles*. In 'The relationship was broken off' and 'My car has broken down', the words *off* and *down* are particles. You can tell this because (unlike prepositions) they lack objects. Verbs that combine a base word and a particle (e.g. *break off* and *break down*), are called *phrasal verbs*. Phrasal verbs that also have a preposition, like *put up with* and *check up on*, are called *phrasal-prepositional verbs*. See *Preposition*.

**Plural** More than one. *Frogs* is the plural of *frog*, which is singular. Where optional plurals are available for words of Latin or Greek origin, it's usually better to favour the English. Hence *referendums* not *referenda*, *forums* not *fora*, *stadiums* not *stadia*, *formulas* not

*formulae, bureaus not bureaux. But criteria not criterions, phenomena not phenomenons.*

**Preposition** A word that usually comes immediately before a noun or pronoun, such as *in, down, up, under, of, with, by, to, from, at*: ‘My car rolled *down* the hill and *under* the bridge.’ Prepositions have objects, *hill* and *bridge* being the objects in that sentence. See *Particle*.

**Pronoun** A word that stands in place of nouns, for example *he, she, it, him, you, I, me, they, anyone*.

**Sentence** A statement, question, exclamation, or command—usually starting with a capital letter and ending in a full stop—which is complete in itself as the expression of a thought. Grammarians differ on what constitutes a sentence, but it’s easiest to think of it as a finished utterance that makes sense in its context. Thus, it will usually have a finite (finished) verb. These, for example, are sentences:

Having succeeded in its first two years, my business will keep growing.

Referring to your letter of 21 January, I can see no cause for alarm.

My business will succeed, no matter what. [where *happens* is implied]

But these are not sentences:

Having succeeded in its first two years.

Referring to your letter of 21 January.

My business will succeed, no matter what anyone. [where it’s not clear how the sentence will be completed]

Examples like the following can be classed as sentences even though they lack verbs, provided they make sense in context—it’s a style often heard in plays and political speeches. The verbs are implied and shown here in square brackets:

[*This is*] Not so.

[*That would happen*] Over my dead body.

[*This has been*] A great success for all concerned.

**Singular** See *Plural*.

**Subject** The noun or pronoun that agrees with the verb. In ‘My elephant needs water’ and ‘The computer has been struck by lightning’, the words *elephant* and *computer* are the subjects. You’ll do your readers a favour if you minimize the gap between the subject and the verb.

**Tense** This shows the *time* and *state* of an action or event in a verb. There are three main tense groups, *present*, *past*, and *future*, which each have four branches as follows:

- Present simple: ‘*They harvest* the crop in June.’
- Present continuous: ‘*They are harvesting* the crop now.’
- Present perfect: ‘*They have harvested* the crop.’
- Present perfect continuous: ‘*They have been harvesting* the crop all day.’
- Future simple: ‘*They will harvest* the crop soon.’
- Future continuous: ‘*They will be harvesting* the crop soon.’
- Future perfect: ‘*They will have harvested* the crop by now.’
- Future perfect continuous: ‘*They will have been harvesting* the crop for several hours.’
- Past simple: ‘*They harvested* the crop yesterday.’
- Past progressive: ‘*They were harvesting* the crop all day.’
- Past perfect (pluperfect): ‘*They had harvested* the crop before the hailstorm struck.’
- Past perfect continuous: ‘*They had been harvesting* the crop for only an hour when the hailstorm struck.’

**Verb** Verbs express an action (*eat, sleep*) or a mental state (*know, believe*), so they are often called *doing words*. They are more accurately called *time-action words* because the action takes place in past, present, or future time. See chapter 6 for active-voice and passive-voice verbs.

Examples of bad grammar: a quiz

In these authentic examples from business correspondence and company websites, the grammar is broken so the meaning is muddy

and readers will need to stop, backtrack, and guess what's meant. Can you identify what's wrong and put it right? At the start of each example, you'll find a hint in square brackets. Suggested answers and explanations follow.

**Q1:** [Punctuation, agreement] Sorry for my late reply due to holidays, our corporate rate for landline calls to Bolivia are 17.86 pence per minute.

**Q2:** [Agreement] Membership would reassure the government that its conditions for bringing schedule 4 into force had, and continued to be met.

**Q3:** [Punctuation, sense] We hope you enjoy reading this issue, however, if you have received this unwittingly please accept our sincere apologies and request you send the e-mail address for removal from our list to Mr X.

**Q4:** [Sense—missing word] It is sad to see many children sat in front of a TV or playstation instead of an ambition to acquire knowledge.

**Q5:** [Sense, jargon] Whether you are looking for a small sofa to for a compact living space or even a conservatory or guest room, you are bound to find one to suit your interior needs at XX Suites. We have put together a collection of small sofas to suit your lifestyle and with dismantling options and now available the size of your room need not hold you back.

**Q6:** [Ambiguity, sense] Nike is exceptionally consistent in its brand expression, from advertising to store design to events, it consistently expresses an attitude of confidence, energy and spirit of participation.

**Q7:** [Sense] Fees for our discretionary investment management services and share dealing services and SIPP services will be provided to you before you take out these services.

**Q8:** [Dangling participle] Treasury minister Chloe Smith struggled to explain the Government's position last night on behalf of the Chancellor in a grilling on *Newsnight* that left viewers cringing with embarrassment. Widely regarded as a disastrous appearance, the Chancellor has been accused of cowardice on social networking sites for not clarifying the Government's latest budget policy reversal himself.

**Q9:** [Tautology—unnecessary repetition, verbal diarrhoea] Our extra-large sofas are made to suit a large interior space and you'll find these impressive designs create an impact. Available in our generously proportioned collections these extra-large sofas are extremely generously proportioned.

**Q10:** [Sense] Any vehicle converted to liquid petroleum gas (LPG) or another approved alternative fuel must supply proof that the conversion has been properly carried out by a competent person or business.

**Q11:** [Punctuation, sentence length] The equipment is often used in applications where there are many racks in one location, so easy management of multiple installations is essential, to accommodate this the equipment can be connected to any compatible network via an optional SNMP card, once the SNMP card has been installed the IT manager can monitor performance via a remote PC or via the internet.

**Q12:** [Muddle, missing words, clumsy phrasing] I would greatly appreciate this opportunity to serve the association as I feel I could bring a fresh outlook to it, not to mention an honour to represent it at meetings and forums. I feel that I would be an asset to the association and the challenges it brings.

**Q13:** [Punctuation] We have over 15 years in website design and development and nearly 25 years in marketing give us a call for a free no obligation quote.

**Q14:** [Wrong word choice, proofreading] I am really sorry about this delay. I have spoken to the branch and they do now have these in. They have ensured me they will get it to yourself this week. I have made a note to call them on wednesday to check weather this has been done yet or not. I hope this is okay.

*Answers and explanations*

- A1:** Each clause is a full sentence so the comma is wrong; it should be a full stop or semicolon. The word *rate* is singular so the verb should be *is not are*.
- A2:** At the end, *had* doesn't fit with anything and *continued* has the wrong tense. So the sentence should end *had been, and would continue to be, met*.
- A3:** The comma after *issue* is wrong because a sentence ends at this point; it should be a full stop or semicolon. The verb *request* has the wrong subject, so it would be better to start a new sentence, e.g. *We request you send the email address...*
- A4:** The word *having* needs to appear after *instead of*; otherwise it sounds as if the children should be sitting in front of an ambition. Though *sat* is now common as used here, the present participle *sitting* is standard-English grammar and the old-fashioned *seated* is also possible. Dialect versions like *we was sat having us tea when the cat come in* (i.e. *we were sitting having our tea when the cat came in*) are widespread in northern England and thus appear in TV sitcoms beamed across the world, to the horror of some.
- A5:** The word *to* is redundant in the first line, as *is and before now available*. This makes everything a muddle. *Interior needs* is jargon, when *home* would do. It would be better to use a separate sentence to explain that some or all of the sofas can be dismantled, and why this might be a good thing, thus avoiding the jargon of *dismantling options*.
- A6:** To remove the ambiguity, there needs to be a full stop after *expression* or *events*, depending on what is meant. And the phrase *an attitude of... spirit of participation* is nonsense—a common problem when lists are overloaded with marketing jargon.
- A7:** The customers will be very lucky if fees are provided to them. The authors probably meant *Details of fees*.... Had they used the active voice, the blunder would have been evident immediately and they might have said, *Before you use our discretionary investment management, share-dealing and SIPD services, we'll give you details of our fees for them*.
- A8:** *Widely regarded* is a dangling past participle that finds itself accidentally and ambiguously agreeing grammatically with *the Chancellor*. So the sentence reads as if the Chancellor is widely regarded as a disastrous appearance.
- A9:** The overuse of *generously proportioned* makes the sentence absurd. Also, it's the sofas not the collections that are *generously proportioned*. In plain lan-

- gauge, *large interior space* usually means *big room*. In any case, *interior* is redundant because people rarely put their new sofas in the open air.
- A10:** Vehicles are inanimate and won't be able to supply the proof needed.
- A11:** There need to be sentence breaks after *essential* and *optional SNMP card*, splitting this long (61-word) run-on sentence (see chapter 10). This kind of error is widespread in business English.
- A12:** The *honour* section is muddled and words are missing. It would be better to start a new sentence and say *It would be an honour to ...*. The final sentence says the author will be an asset to the challenges of the job, which is meaningless.
- A13:** There needs to be a sentence break after *marketing* as this is a run-on sentence (see chapter 10).
- A14:** The final two sentences would be better as 'They have ~~ensured~~ assured me they will get it to you ~~yourself~~ this week. I have made a note to call them on ~~wednesday~~ Wednesday to check ~~whether~~ whether or not this has been done.'

# 12

## Keeping errors in Czech: its time to Proof read

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**GUIDELINE** *Check your material before the readers do.*

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Seeing whether the bus driver has given you the right change. Ensuring the shoebox contains a left and right boot before you leave the shop. Checking you've not left swabs inside the patient.

Only one of these actions is a matter of life and death. The others are just a bit boring and pedantic. Rather like proofreading, some think.

Yet proofreading matters. Without it, your writing could soon be plagued by *uninformed* not *uniformed* police, *marital* not *martial* arts, *infernal* not *internal* disputes, and *pubic* not *public* affairs. And, like one hotel manager, you could even find yourself keeping people abreast of events in the brasserie by telling them: 'We offer two restaurants, The Arctic and Scizzios brassiere.' In 1942, *The Daily Telegraph* famously reported that '200 US marines in rubber boots' had raided enemy-occupied Makin in the Gilbert Islands. The headline, however, proclaimed 'Landed in rubber boats', leaving readers to wonder whether it was cobblers or chandlers who had equipped the troops.

If you spend time clarifying your writing, it makes sense to invest a fraction more in a final check for errors before you send or publish. The most important thing about proofreading is to care enough to do it. Many documents, emails, and websites have errors in them, from misspellings to grammatical slips and factual blunders. Some readers won't notice or think any less of the author if they do. But plenty will



regard a rash of errors, or even one gross error, as proof that the author is an idiot. They'll therefore reject what's being said.

So check and put things right. And when correcting the errors, try not to insert new ones. In a previous edition of this book, my last-minute changes included: 'Organizations that want to win the confidence of customers should give them incomprehensible legal agreements to sign.' The same kind of blunder created the so-called Adulterous Bible of 1631, in which the seventh commandment said: 'Thou shalt commit adultery.' In 2009, the *Sun* newspaper ran a series of front-page articles criticizing the British prime minister (who had a serious sight defect) for misspelling the name of the soldier Jamie Janes, killed in Afghanistan, in a handwritten letter of condolence to his mother. The paper then had to print a shamefaced apology for giving her the surname *Jones* in an online article.

False negatives are easy to miss, as *The Times* showed in an obituary of an anti-apartheid activist: 'By then [1990] London had effectively become a global centre for opposition to anti-apartheid as well as a centre for exiled activists from the ANC (African National Congress).' For *anti-apartheid*, read *apartheid*.

### What is proofreading?

Proofreading is about being remorseless on detail: checking things like spelling, punctuation, double or missing word spacing, use of upper- and lower-case letters, grammar, layout, and highlighting. So it's about getting things right, making them consistent, and avoiding the burrs and blots that may distract or derail the rushing reader. It corrects mistakes before they embarrass you.

Proofreading is not skim-reading hurriedly for information. To proofread well, you need to slow down. Try to make time for two checks. That's one for the big picture (layout, headings, type) and another for the details (sense, spelling, grammar, and punctuation).

### Proofreading on screen

If you're proofreading on screen, try to adjust the image size and brightness so that the type, including the punctuation, is highly legible.

You can get some help from your computer program's automatic spell-check, too, though most grammar-checking software is weak and confusing. The program should show where you've typed an extra space by mistake, failed to type a space, or omitted an initial capital. And it can help check consistency—the search-and-replace feature in Microsoft Word, for example, can quickly find all uses of *9* and change them to *nine*, and the program PerfectIt has won admirers for being able to spot inconsistencies. The human brain tends to beat computers at seeing homonyms (words that sound the same but are spelt differently)—*there* for *their*, *to* for *too* or *two*, *ball* for *bawl*, and *sun* for *son*.

### Proofreading on paper

If you're proofreading on paper, first make sure the lighting is right. Then run that potent weapon, your index finger, beneath the lines of type so your eye concentrates on each word (or use a ruler to cover everything except the line you're reading). This helps because in normal reading you're too clever—your brain sees the way the pattern is going and jumps to conclusions without spotting the detail.

### Common sources of error

Depending on the document's nature, length, and importance, you also need to check—separately—at least fifteen things:

- 1 Conformity with your organization's house style, if any: it will often prescribe preferred spellings (e.g. *organize* or *organise*) and how vertical lists should be punctuated.
- 2 Alignment: check margins, bulleted lists, and everything that's supposed to align horizontally or vertically.
- 3 Captions: check captions on photos and illustrations. Often they'll have been added late and retyped by a designer in a hurry, rather than cut-and-pasted from the author's work.
- 4 Contents list: check that the listed chapter or section headings are identical to the way they appear in the rest of the document and have the correct page numbers. If the contents list seems error-free, you may not have looked hard enough. There's (nearly) always a mistake.

- 5 Dates are often wrong: when a day of the week is given, check it matches the calendar. The date error in this English council's letter was missed by its author: 'Having visited the site on 28 March 1007, a visual inspection showed the complaint to be justified.' (King Ethelred himself may have been Unready that sunny springtime, but it's good to know his officials were keeping busy.) The layout of dates should also be consistent, e.g. in the pattern *10 January 1954* (preferably) or *January 10, 1954*, not both.
- 6 Phone numbers and webpage addresses: check them if that's part of your brief.
- 7 Headlines: check these separately. They may have the authority of bigger type, but errors will often lurk. A headline in *The Times* spoke of 'A salutary tale of greed, adventure, and unlikely characters'—read *salutary*. A rambler's magazine spelt Lake Waikaremoana correctly, which takes some doing, but the headline above said 'Plunging into the Maori lengend' (read *legend*).
- 8 Numbers and prices: it's easy to mistype numbers, so check them. An article about the tanker Braer running aground off Shetland referred to its carrying 85 tonnes of crude oil. A sceptical proofreader would have realized this was practically a thimbleful—the real tonnage was 85,000. *The Guardian's* review of a book on English began by saying it was priced at £00.00—highly improbable.
- 9 Spelling of names: be alert for oddities that may be mistakes; they're often easily checked on the Web. For example, *St Margrets Road* is probably *St Margaret's Road*; the *Princess Louse School* in Blyth is probably the *Princess Louise School*; and if a Restoration poet is referred to as *Ben Johnson*, he's probably the famous *Ben Jonson* (whose tombstone in Westminster Abbey should also have been proofread as it says *Johnson*). If you're a proofreader in Wales (which some may regard as a guarantee of full-time work), the aqueduct near Trevor is spelt *Pontcysyllte*.
- 10 Names of organizations, cities, countries: these change. The UK's *Department of Education and Science* became the *Department for Education* in 1992, the *Department for Education and Employment* in 1995, the *Department for Education and Skills* in 2001, the *Department for Children, Schools and Families* in 2007, and the *Department for Education* from 2010 to the time of writing (2019), enabling its longest-serving officials to recycle Yogi Berra's immortal line, 'It's déjà vu all over again.' The *Royal National Institute for the Blind* became in 2002 the *Royal National Institute of the Blind*, and then in 2007 the *Royal National Institute of Blind People*; helpfully, it has remained the RNIB throughout. Stay alert for names

similar to each other being confused, as in this TV review in *The Times*: ‘There was good news about education, however. Not from *Panorama* but on *Teen Mum High* (BBC Two) which found an Ofcom-lauded secondary school in Stockport.’ (For *Ofcom*, the UK telecoms and broadcasting regulator, read *Ofsted*, the education inspectorate.) *Calcutta* is *Kolkata*, *Madras* is *Chennai*, *Peking* is *Beijing*. *Burma* is usually given as *Myanmar*. The *Republic of Macedonia* is now the *Republic of North Macedonia*, after much dispute with Greece about its name. *Great Britain* is still England, Scotland, and Wales, while the *UK* is still Great Britain and Northern Ireland. *Ireland* or *Eire* is a country that shares a border with Northern Ireland.

- 11 Footnotes, paragraph numbers, page numbers, running headers and running footers, and cross-references to page or chapter numbers: all need a separate check. The title of a booklet may sometimes differ from the title given in its running footers because an old template has been used unamended.
- 12 Easily confused words—see also chapter 13 (all examples from *The Times* or *Sunday Times* 2016–18 unless otherwise stated):
  - ‘Mischel...carried out studies...as to whether...a person who is a loose canon at meetings is similar at home with their kids.’ (As *canon* is a booklist or cleric, read *cannon*.)
  - ‘Dejan Lovren...was hit on the head by the ball as he lay prostate.’ (Read *prostrate*.)
  - ‘Her findings also applied to prostate cancer, she claimed.’ (Read *prostate*.)
  - ‘Over 20 years, he has ridden my home of garden rats, kitchen mice and wasps’ nests.’ (For *ridden*, which is to do with riding, read *rid*. *Daily Mail*, 18 Aug. 2017.)
  - ‘It was late when the porn star [Stormy Daniels] intent on avenging President Trump stepped on to the stage at Sirens.’ (For *intent on avenging*, read *intent on revenge against*—the opposite, but intended, meaning.)
  - ‘The series [McMafia] was mainly filmed in Croatia and is an adaption of Misha Glenny’s 2008 book of the same name.’ (For *adaption*, a non-word, read *adaptation*.)
  - ‘They have bought cleverly...: the Belgian Laurent Depoitre, prized from Porto for seven million quid.’ (For *prized* (esteemed), read *prised*, which in British English is about obtaining things with difficulty.)

- 13 Homonyms: commonly confused soundalikes are *principle/principal*, *compliment/complement*, *it's/its*. Errors involving the last two came together in this example from a furniture brochure: 'Every home is unique with *it's* (read *its*) own character and style. We listen to you and provide carefully considered solutions that are engineered to compliment (read *complement*) your home and your lifestyle.' In an unusual example of a near-homonym, *The Guardian* managed to confuse military takeovers with henhouses when it said that early TV sports commentators were 'confined to glorified chicken coups [read *coops*] lashed to an outer extremity of a grandstand'.
- 14 Consistency in punctuation: lists of opening times are a common source of error, e.g. 'The office opening hours will be 8 am to 6p.m. on Mon to Friday and Sat from 9am-1pm.' Tidying up the inconsistencies of spacing, abbreviation, wording, and punctuation might give: 'Office opening hours: Mon–Fri 8am–6pm, and Sat 9am–1pm.'
- 15 Alphabetical order: check that the items listed really are in this order.

### Checking against copy

The rare activity of checking against copy means making sure a piece of typesetting replicates what the author wrote. If checking on paper, it helps to use a ruler or blank notepad to screen everything except the line you're reading, as you're constantly referring from one document to another. Ideally, ask a second person to read out the original. Checking numbers in a set of accounts or calculations can be especially tricky: ensuring the layout is right is all-important, and proofreading other people's figures reminds you to set out your own methodically.

### For the professionals

If you're marking up copy for professional typesetters to correct, then using the standard proofreading marks may help—though many a typesetter will tell you to just make yourself clear, mainly in the margins, without using all the fancy notation. Conrad Taylor's free guide to the main marks is available from <[www.conradiator.com/resources/pdf/proofmarks2010.pdf](http://www.conradiator.com/resources/pdf/proofmarks2010.pdf)>, and there are similar sources on the Web for British and American proofreaders. The BSI

website sells the standard on which many British guides are based (BS 5261C:2005).

When in doubt

For difficult spellings, use a good dictionary. Take extra care with commonly misspelt words, such as *questionnaire*, *accommodate*, *definitely*, *liaison/liaise*, *existence*, *occurrence*, *referring*, *occurred*, and *embarrass*. If you can't spell, get someone else to proofread. And yes, since you ask, there were four mistakes in this chapter's title (*check*, *it's*, *proof*, and *proofread*). Well spotted.

### **Proofreading blunders that chill the blood (or raise a smile)**

- 'The UK's education ministry reprinted 48,000 posters promoting literacy in schools after spelling mistakes were spotted by teachers. The blunder cost £7,000 and was blamed on 'proofreaders'.' [*Daily Telegraph*, 29 January 2000]
- 'A music exam paper taken by 12,000 pupils in the UK had the answers printed on the back, enabling pupils to gain 30% of the marks if they read the information.' [*Daily Mail*, 23 May 2008]
- The first leader in *The Times* on 12 September 2008 referred four times to *Professor Michael Weiss*, apparently the Royal Society's director of education. The news item on the opposite page named him correctly—again, four times—as *Professor Michael Reiss*.
- 'Four years ago this May...the University of Wisconsin awarded nearly 4,000 diplomas with the name of the state spelled "Wisconsin". Amazingly, six months passed before anyone noticed and brought it to the University's attention.' [*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 3 April 1992]
- For his testimonial year in 2000, England cricketer Ashley Giles ordered drinking mugs to be printed with *Ashley Giles, King of Spin*. Instead the potters gave him royal status as *Ashley Giles, King of Spain*.
- The BBC's website on Armistice Day 2008 included a picture captioned 'WW1 veterans laid reefs at Cenotaph'. [Read *wreaths*.]
- The sportswriter Frank Keating once wrote a piece about C B Fry, the great cricketer and talented long jumper which included the fact that

his party trick was to jump backwards onto a mantelpiece ‘from a standing start’. To Keating’s dismay, this appeared in the newspaper as *from a standing tart*. He complained, only to find that the next edition rendered it as *from a standing fart*. [*The Week*, 9 February 2013]

- In 2005, the Typo of the Year award was won by Reuters for this: ‘Quaker Maid Meats Inc. on Tuesday said it would voluntarily recall 94,400 pounds of frozen ground beef panties that may be contaminated with E. coli.’ [Read *patties*, presumably.]
- ‘Shortly after parking, she stripped after her foot was caught in a hole next to a cable cover where the pavement had crumbled away.’ [Read *tripped*. *Daily Mail*, 25 August 2018.]
- Emma Watson, the actor and English-literature graduate, supported the Time’s Up movement against sexual harassment in the film industry by having her arm temporarily tattooed with the words *Times Up*. When her followers pointed out this was meaningless, she tweeted: ‘Fake tattoo proofreading position available. Experience with apostrophes a must.’ [*CBS News*, 5 March 2018]
- Cathay Pacific airline had to return a plane for respray after passengers noticed the company’s name was misspelt in massive letters *Cathay Paciic* on the fuselage. [*The Times*, 20 September 2018]
- Headline: ‘Julia Roberts Finds Life and Her Holes Get Better With Age.’ [*The Post-Journal*, Jamestown, New York, 8 December 2018]. Read *roles*.

# 13

## Dealing with some troublesome words and phrases

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**GUIDELINE** *Think carefully how—or whether or not—you'll use certain words and phrases.*

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We all contribute to linguistic democracy by choosing how to use words, which words to use, how to pronounce words, and even what words mean. If we have a good reason for wanting to stretch a word's meaning, invent a new word, or misuse a word whose meaning everyone has so far accepted, we can do it—and maybe persuade others to follow suit.

All words were new once. Shakespeare experimented with and helped popularize many new words he'd picked up, like *antipathy*, *armada*, *critical*, *dire*, *emulate*, *horrid*, *modest*, and *vast*. Recent times have produced *upcycling*, *bootylicious*, *carbon footprint*, *crowdsource*, *trout pout*, *unfriend*, *hashtag*, *paywall*, *woke* (in the sense of 'culturally and politically tuned in'), and *helicopter parent*. And who can forget the genius of soccer pundit Iain Dowie in coining *bouncebackability* in the 2000s, a word that perfectly fills a niche? In the end, popular use decides what words survive as standard English, often in defiance of linguistic scholars.

Plain English is a form of standard English, but standard English changes over time and from place to place. This means that what is plain English changes too—for example, recent introductions like *crowdsource* and *smartphone* are now widely understood, whereas the much-used *trope* and *non-binary* can still be confusing for some people.



This chapter covers two topics. First, it looks at certain words and phrases that cause difficulty for authors and readers, sometimes because they're jargonistic or fashionable expressions that annoy careful users, and sometimes because they divide opinion on whether they're likely to be clear to a mass audience. Second, the chapter lists certain words that deserve special attention because authors often confuse them, which creates further confusion among readers.

### Troublesome words and phrases

**absolutely** This is sometimes printed as the emphatic answer to question-headings like 'Do pensioners qualify for this discount?' But *Yes* does the job perfectly. In the BBC's 2008 adaptation of *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens, *absolutely* was the preferred affirmative of Sparkler, the dimwitted jobsworth of the Circumlocution Office. Its use spreads into print because Sparkler's *absolutely*-prone heirs thrive today among interviewees on many political, scientific, and arts programmes. Perhaps they think it makes them sound more intelligent than if they use a plain old *yes*.

**address** 'We are addressing the issue and will let you have a reply soon.' Cynics say *address* is a cover for inaction, as it seems to promise more than it ever delivers. More precise verbs are usually available, such as *consider* and *tackle*. (See *tackle*, later.)

**advices** Still a favourite pomposity among lawyers: 'I await your *advices* in respect of this matter.' Better to be precise and use *instructions*, *suggestions*, or *comments*.

**advise** Widespread business English for *inform*, *tell*, or *let me know*, but to avoid ambiguity it's better to use one of these and keep *advise* for *give advice to*. In a phrase like 'please be *advised* we are considering your application', the first three words can be omitted.

**amount** is normally used with a mass or abstract noun but **number** is normally used with a count noun (i.e. you can count the number). So 'the amount of gold' but 'the number of gold chains'; and 'the amount of coal' but 'the number of coalminers'.

**and/or** The oblique puts the reader to the trouble of creating three possible meanings. Instead of writing ‘We’ll bring carrots *and/or* potatoes’, prefer ‘We’ll bring carrots or potatoes *or both*.’ When used in legal documents, *and/or* has caused much litigation. If you can avoid it without making the sentence long-winded or muddled, do so.

**anticipate** Often used as a posh word for *expect*. Their different meanings should not be allowed to merge, say careful users. *Anticipate* means to take some action to forestall, or benefit from, a future event, e.g. ‘Customers *anticipated* the rise in interest rates by choosing fixed-rate loans.’

**any time/anytime soon** ‘The marble figures of Hippocrates, Darwin and Linnaeus... are unlikely to be wrenched from their pedestals *any time soon*.’ [*The Times*, 18 October 2016] Prefer *soon* to this vogue expression, but it seems so irresistible to journalists and broadcasters that resistance is probably futile.

**apropos (of)** Prefer *about*, *concerning*, or *with reference to*.

**as and when** This never seems to mean anything more than *when* or *if*:

*As and when* the go-ahead is given, the project will involve the construction of a new station as well as rail tunnels.

—which probably means:

As soon as we get the go-ahead for the project, we’ll start building a new station and rail tunnels.

**as at** ‘The value of your shares *as at* 5 April was £324.’ Normally, *on* or *at* will do.

**as per** ‘I enclose the form *as per* our conversation.’ It’s better, if not always possible, to avoid mixing English and Latin in the same phrase. Prefer ‘I enclose the form, *as discussed*.’ Alternatively, *in accordance with* or *in line with* will often do the job. *As per usual*, instead of *as usual*, is especially cringe-making.

**as such** Some authors use this to mean *so* or *therefore* but it’s used more clearly in statements like: ‘Tasks may have been completed but we cannot show them *as such* until we receive the bills from the

contractors', where *as such* means *as completed tasks*—in other words, it has an earlier referent. Writing of a great cricket innings, C L R James uses *as such* in this traditional way:

In England or Australia such a display would have marked him down as a rare batsman. He would have been selected *as such* in big games, coached *as such*, advised *as such*, made to feel his responsibility *as such*. Not so in the West Indies of those days and not so for [Learie] Constantine.

**at the end of the day** This is waffle for *ultimately, eventually, or in the end*. The only thing that really occurs *at the end of the day* is nightfall.

**avail yourself** 'If you fail to *avail yourself* of the facilities above, your electricity supply could be cut off without further notice.' Avoid such woolly, genteel expressions (though this use of *avail* is common in Indian English). Prefer 'If you do not *use* [or *take up* or *make use of*] one of the repayment methods above . . . '.

**brainchild** This is journalese for *idea*. If you are lucky enough to have several ideas, defy the temptation to call them *brainchildren*.

**can/may/might** Careful users are very careful with *can* and *may*. The first means *is able to* as in 'Helen *can* take solid food now that her jaw is mended.' The second means *is permitted to but need not*, as in 'Helen *may* take solid food because the doctor says it's safe to do so.' The second meaning is common in legal documents:

The secretary of state *may* make rules requiring a patents register to be kept. The rules *may* delegate the keeping of the register to another person.

Concern that *may* will not be understood correctly has led to at least one credit-card provider explaining it in its terms and conditions, which seems excessive:

If we agree with another person or business (the transferee) for it to take over all our rights and obligations under this agreement, we *may* (but do not have to) give you at least 30 days' notice beforehand.

*May not* refuses permission. Thus, Apple, the 14-year-old daughter of actress Gwyneth Paltrow, publicly lays down the rules of teenage life to her mother:

Mom, we have discussed this. You *may not* post anything [on Instagram depicting me] without my consent.' (*Daily Mail*, 27 March 2019).

*May* can also imply a positive possibility:

You should show this letter to other joint shareholders as they *may* receive different information from elsewhere.

whereas *might* in that position would suggest the possibility is more remote. In practice most people use *may* and *might* interchangeably in such situations, annoying some sticklers because *might* is the past tense of *may*.

**challenge** As a noun, this has become jargon for *problem* or *difficulty*, e.g. 'We've faced many *challenges* in balancing the budget.' As an adjective, **challenging** can sometimes seem mealy-mouthed, e.g. 'John exhibits *challenging behaviours* in his nursery group', but this may arise from a wish not to be judgmental of children too young to know any better. In such a case, details of the behaviour will help readers understand what's really being said. The term is also used in some supposedly jokey or politically correct euphemisms, e.g. *follicly challenged* for *balding*; and *vertically challenged* for *short in stature*.

**comprise of/is comprised of** As *comprise* means *is composed of*, the *of* is built in to the meaning, so estate agents can simply write:

This spacious property *comprises* [not *comprises of* or *is comprised of*] a main villa including home cinema, gym and separate guest villa.

**confirm** A common source of confusion is to ask somebody to *confirm* something that hasn't yet been proposed or mentioned. In such cases, use *tell* or *let me know*.

**consult with** In phrases like 'We *consulted with* the public', just omit *with*. It's redundant.

**deliver** Much used as jargon for *provide* or *fulfil*, e.g. 'We will *deliver* Brexit', 'We have *delivered* excellent public services.' Related noun phrases often smack of jargon, too, e.g. '*Service delivery implementation* has improved.' Officials and politicians have used *deliver* and

*delivery* so often on the airwaves that resistance seems futile, but sensitive editors will replace them in written material with less robotic phrases. A new front has opened with *deliver on*, e.g. 'We will *deliver on* our promises.' This ought to mean 'We will fulfil our promises' but using *on* enables it to mean the weaselly 'We'll go some way towards fulfilling our promises.'

**determine/determination** In the legal sense, this means *terminate* (e.g. 'This agreement shall forthwith *determine*') but most people won't understand it in this sense and the same goes for *determination*. If variations on *end*, *stop*, *finish*, or *cease* won't work, then *terminate* and *termination* are likely to be clearer than *determine* and *determination*.

**die** Don't be afraid of this word. It's preferable to euphemisms like *passed away*, *is deceased*, and *has crossed the rainbow bridge*. However, if you feel that *die* is tactless, you can begin a letter of condolence with sentences like 'I was sorry to read in this week's *Norwich Examiner* about the *loss* [or *passing*] of your father.'

**disconnect** 'We regret that your supply could be *disconnected* unless you make a satisfactory arrangement to pay the arrears.' It used to be impossible to persuade electricity and gas suppliers to use the plainer *cut off*—it was thought to be aggressive or too basic. Now it's widespread. However, *disconnect* is an everyday word and you may feel it wins on tactfulness.

**discriminate/discrimination** Without *discrimination*, nobody would choose anything or anybody, because the word merely means making a choice between things or people. So when organizations proudly proclaim they won't *discriminate against* anyone, they aren't telling the full story. They really mean they won't *discriminate against anyone unfairly or unlawfully* on particular grounds, such as age, sex, religion, sexual preference, and disability.

**documentation** 'We will let you have the *documentation* in the next ten days.' This is pompous: *documents* will nearly always do.

**duly** This usually means *in the correct manner*. A company's share-offer letter includes a rash of *duly*s:

I am pleased to tell you that... as a qualifying shareholder, an application for shares *duly* made by you... will receive special treatment... This means that, if you *duly* apply in the offer... If you *duly* apply on this application form...

The company could have dropped *duly* and just said that shareholders had to correctly complete the form to qualify for the offer.

**etc.** (Latin: *et cetera*, meaning *and the rest*.) This is perhaps the best understood Latin abbreviation and, though sometimes labelled ‘extreme thought collapse’, is harmless if used in moderation and if precision isn’t essential: ‘The burglar stole TVs, videos, *etc.*’ If a list is introduced by a word like *such as* or *includes*, then *etc.* is unnecessary because the reader knows the list is incomplete: ‘The stolen goods included TVs, videos, and stereos.’

**general consensus of opinion** In a word, *consensus* covers it.

**get/got** Primary-school teachers’ exasperation at the overuse of these words has left many people afraid to use them at all in writing. The alternatives *receive* and *obtain* are plain enough but there’s no harm in *get* and *got* (words with a thousand years of common use behind them) if you think their simplicity and informality are helpful:

I *got* [‘had’ or ‘received’] your letter yesterday. Thanks for keeping me informed.  
I’ll *get* [‘send’] someone around to fix the problem.

If your managers forbid the words, you could do worse than silently recite the text that adorns the dome of Manchester’s central library (from Proverbs in the Bible):

Wisdom is the principal thing therefore *get* wisdom and with all thy *getting get* understanding.

—which doubles as a counterblast to people who say you shouldn’t repeat the same word in a sentence or paragraph.

**going forward(s)** This falsely dynamic phrase has become a verbal weed. The universities minister used it thirty-four times in just over an hour in the Commons, according to *The Times* (30 April 2019). It’s being written too: ‘The department would like you to attend a workshop designed to debate specific issues in depth and identify

potential recommendations *going forward*.'; 'The proposed volumes...seek to promote...an interdisciplinary debate from law, semiotics, and visuality bringing together the cumulative research traditions of these related areas as a prelude to identifying fertile avenues for research *going forward*.'; and 'The demands of my growing family mean I am unable to commit to the market with the same intensity *going forward*.' The phrase is usually redundant because the context implies a future sense.

**having said that** or **that having been said** A waffling way of writing *but, however, or even so*. Addicts can withdraw slowly with *that said*.

**head up** In 'Mrs Smith *heads up* the team', omit *up*.

**heads-up** It's hard to dislike this informal alternative for *notice* or *warning*, as in 'Carlos gave us the *heads-up* that changes are on the way', but often a more exact verb will do, e.g. 'Carlos *alerted/warned/told us*'.

**hence** A useful but regrettably uncommon word. It can mean *as a result* ('*hence* the election will take place next week') or *from now* ('The election will take place two weeks *hence*'). Use the word regularly or it will disappear.

**hereby, herein, hereinbefore, hereof, hereto, heretofore, herewith**

These smell of old law books; they are not plain words to most people. 'I *hereby* declare' just means *I declare*. 'The document attached *hereto*' just means *the document attached* or *the document attached to this*. Happily, these words are gradually disappearing from business and legal use, which should cause no one to fear the imminent death of the language. Do we miss, for example, a range of once common words beginning with the *wan-* prefix: *wanthrif* (extravagance), *wanhap* (misfortune), *wantruth* (falsehood), and *wanchance* (ill luck)? Only *wanton* (undisciplined) remains widespread.

**however** As this is often used as a more leisurely alternative to *but*, it is usually preceded and followed by a comma:

It seems clear that your opponent lied in court. We do not believe, *however*, that she is likely to be convicted of perjury.

If *however* begins a sentence—often the best position, since it tells the reader immediately what sort of point is coming up—a comma will normally follow:

*However*, we do not believe that she is likely to be convicted of perjury.

The next sentence shows a common mistake with *however*:

You have told us the ring was stolen while the back door was left open, *however*, the policy only covers theft from your home if force is used to enter or leave.

Because *however* seems to lengthen the pause that precedes it, effectively creating a second sentence, a comma is not enough. A semicolon or full stop (see chapter 10) would be better:

You have told us the ring was stolen while the back door was left open. *However*, the policy covers only...

Or you could use *but* and lose some of the punctuation:

You have told us the ring was stolen while the back door was left open, *but* the policy covers only...

Obviously, there's no need for a comma after *however* in such sentences as '*However* likeable he was, he had a vicious streak.'

**icon** and **iconic** These words are often used as an all-purpose booster to interesting or well-known objects or people. So, in tourist information, landmarks like the London Eye and Nelson's Column are invariably described as *iconic*. Instead of succumbing to hype and cliché like this, authors would do better to say what's special about the thing. The original (Greek) meaning of *icon* is a religious artwork.

**impact (on)** 'The defeat will *impact on* us badly.' Use *affect*—'The defeat will *affect* us badly.' It saves a word, shows you can tell your *affects* from your *effects*, and enables you to be more precise. This example shows how woolly *impact* can be as a verb: '[The professor] has been studying the long-term effects of structured play and the way it has *impacted* at university level.' The author might have written, e.g., 'The professor has been studying the long-term effects of structured play and how it leads children to become timid and



dependent university students.’ This from a UK science magazine: ‘Soon they were turning up the evidence that these tiny fragments of plastic have the potential to *impact* all kinds of marine creatures. Metabolism was being altered; immune function changed. Growth and reproduction affected.’ (*Planet Earth*, NERC, Autumn/Winter 2018) The phrase *have the potential to impact* would be clearer and more precise as *could harm*. Before using *impact* as a verb, consider whether it will seem crass or discordant, given the conventional meaning of *impact* as a noun (e.g. two objects colliding). For example, when a crush at a St Patrick’s Day party in Northern Ireland in 2019 killed three teenagers, a local political leader said, ‘[My] thoughts and prayers are with everyone *impacted*’—again, *affected* would have avoided any upsetting connotations. Finally, this sentence from a business letter says: ‘I would like to reassure you that you should not be *impacted as a result of this change*.’ (Read *affected by this change*).

**implement** As a ponderous verb, this mars many an official document with repetitive use of such phrases as ‘We will implement [read *make* or *apply*] changes to the policy.’ It’s hard never to use it, though, as sometimes it best expresses the action. The same is true of **implementation**, but if you can do nothing else with this, you can try to recast the sentence using the verb *implement*.

**incredible** and **incredibly** These words literally mean that something cannot be believed. Many authors and broadcasters use them as all-purpose intensifiers when describing likeable or appealing landscapes, mountains, valleys, dogs, etc.—all of which are wholly believable, often because they are being shown on the screen. Several long-running BBC TV series—especially those on wildlife, the countryside, and the climate—always seem to include a blizzard of *incredibles* and *incrediblys*, to the dismay of anyone with a sensitive ear or low boredom threshold. After only twenty months as leader of the House of Commons, Andrea Leadsom MP had used *incredibly* 250 times, according to *Hansard* (*The Times*, 8 February 2019).

**in terms of** For conciseness, this wordy preposition can usually be replaced by *on*, *for*, or *in*. For example, ‘We have made significant progress *in terms of* [read *in*] reducing our carbon footprint’, which could also be written with a better verb (see chapter 7) as ‘We have significantly *reduced* our carbon footprint.’ However, *in terms of* can be what *Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 2015) calls a ‘useful particularizing device’, e.g. ‘The scheme brings immense benefits to the region *in terms of* outdoor recreation, artistic events, and wildlife habitat.’

**in the way of** This long-winded preposition is starting to appear in writing, perhaps in homage to weather forecasters who use such constructions as ‘little *in the way of* rain today’ [read *little rain today*] or ‘plenty *in the way of* sunshine recently’ [read *plenty of sunshine recently*]. Avoid.

**issue** As an abstract noun meaning *problem*, *difficulty*, *reservation*, *worry*, *concern*, etc., this can be too vague for ready understanding. For example, ‘We have several *issues* with this plan’ may be more concretely put as ‘We dislike/want to challenge/disapprove of several parts of this plan.’

**I write or I am writing** Many writers are told not to begin letters with these phrases because it’s obvious they are writing. But ‘*I write* to explain the department’s policy on . . .’ is quite harmless—you could not start with ‘*I explain*’. On the other hand ‘*I write to inform you that*’ may as well be deleted, as nothing useful has been said.

**meet up with/meet with** In British English, it’s usually neat to use only *meet*. The longer form, using *up*, may suggest a more complicated rendezvous, like ‘we’re trying to *meet up with* them in Kathmandu.’

**methodology** This means a body of methods or the study of method and its application in a particular field. It’s often misused as a posh word for *method*.

**Ms** This, pronounced *miz*, is the chosen courtesy title of many women who do not wish to disclose their marital status with *Miss* or *Mrs*.

Use it unless the woman has asked to be addressed by a different title. If a woman signs her letters ‘Susan Hopkins’ without indicating a preferred title, there’s no harm in writing to her as ‘Dear Susan Hopkins’ or ‘Dear Ms Hopkins’.

**note** There’s a vogue for using ‘please *note* that...’ and ‘kindly *note* that...’. These orders are rarely necessary and, if they are, it’s best to use them sparingly because they may seem overbearing. If you need to emphasize a point, use a layout device such as bold type.

**null and void** *Null* means *void* (of no effect), so there’s no need for both words in a phrase like ‘the agreement is *null and void*’. Use *void* or *worthless*.

**opine** ‘The barrister *opined* that the case would fail in court.’ This uncommon word smells of pomposity in British English but means *to give a formal (usually written) opinion*. Avoiding *opine* leads to wordiness like ‘*It is the opinion of the barrister that...*’, so perhaps it would be good to popularize it again. *Opine* is widespread in India. Alternatives include *believe*, *consider*, *say*.

**prior to** This pompous way of saying *before* tends to produce verb-free constructions: ‘*Prior to* the abandonment of the mine by the company’ instead of ‘*Before* the company abandoned the mine.’ It’s better to keep *prior* as an adjective—‘*prior* approval’, ‘*prior* discussion’—or as the title for someone in charge of a monastery.

**re** ‘*Re*: Your claim for housing benefit.’ A Latin remnant from the word *res* (‘a thing’), this is not a short form of *reference* or *regarding*. The word should be struck from all headings to letters and emails, which should stand on their own. Elsewhere, prefer *about*, *concerning*, or *on*. When referring to cases, lawyers often use *re* to mean *in the matter of*: ‘*Re* [or even *In re*] Smith 2019’. Better is ‘*In* Smith 2019’.

**reach out** ‘I wanted to *reach out* because I found you on Google’ and ‘We’re *reaching out* to let you know you haven’t updated your password since 2017.’ This verb is much used in business emails, particularly by companies making a sales pitch. It sounds pleading and I couldn’t bear to use it myself, but it’s clear and undoubtedly popular.

**revert** In phrases like ‘I’ll *revert* to you soon’, lawyers mean ‘I’ll *get back* to you soon’ or ‘I’ll *contact* you soon’. It’s not yet widespread but is neat and concise.

**roll out** Much used in official statements, e.g. ‘We are *rolling out* refreshed targets on climate change’, this seeks to capture the glamour of sleek new aircraft sliding out of hangars. (The noun **rollout** or **roll-out** is also common.) It’s a bit phony but easily understood.

**shall** The old rule was that when writing of future events you would say ‘I *shall*; you will; he/she/it will; we *shall*; you (plural) will; they will’ but that when writing of promises, obligations, or commands, the *wills* and *shalls* would change places. This is why the British coronation oath goes:

Archbishop: Will you to your power cause law and justice, with mercy, to be executed in all your judgments?

Sovereign: *I will*.

And it’s why Laurence Binyon’s much-quoted poem *For the Fallen* (1914) says:

They *shall* grow not old, as we that are left grow old,  
Age *shall* not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
*We will* remember them.

But few people now understand these distinctions—witness the Last Night of the Proms in the Albert Hall, London, where half the audience choose *will* and the other half *shall* as they bellow ‘Britons never, never, never *shall* be slaves’ in ‘Rule, Britannia!’. So there is confusion when legal documents use *shall* in an effort to impose an obligation. *Must* is clearer for this purpose: ‘The tenant *must* pay the rent on time.’ Conveniently for people who take this view, the Old English root of *shall* is *sceal*, meaning *I must* or *I owe*. The Oxford University Press figures mentioned in chapter 4 show 162 uses of *shall*, so it is still common, but 667 of *must*. For legal prohibitions, *may not* and *must not* are widely used.

**should** Traditionally this was the correct form of the conditional tense in the first person singular and plural. Or, in plain English, it was right to say ‘I *should*; you would; he/she/it would; we *should*; you would; they would’. This is why many still prefer to write: ‘I *should* be grateful if you *would*’ not ‘I *would* be grateful if you *could*’ or ‘I *would* be grateful if you *would*’. Neat sidesteps are to write ‘I’d be grateful if you *would*’ or ‘*Would* you please’.

**solutions** This is sometimes added to elevate the status of what may seem humdrum activities, thus *plumbing solutions*, *network solutions*, *building solutions*. It’s jargonistic, so avoid.

**tackle** (verb) To *tackle* a problem or difficulty, i.e. to get to grips with it, is everyday English and more energetic than to *address* a problem. *Tackle* in this sense predates its use in sports like rugby (*New Shorter Oxford dictionary*). It’s a pity that the plain-English style guide on the British government’s gov.uk website (March 2019) outlaws *tackling* ‘unless it’s [to do with] rugby, football or some other sport’. Ignore the style guide on this point, at least.

**thank you very much indeed** This variant of *thank you* is much used by windy broadcasters. Avoid it in writing, too.

**tiny little**—as in ‘It was a tiny little dog’. Use *tiny* or *little*, not both.

**to hand** ‘I have *to hand* your letter of 15 January.’ This is the kind of snooty language that gets bureaucrats a bad name. Avoid it with *thank you for* or *I refer to*. If you want to say ‘please have the documents *to hand* when I call’, you could use *ready* instead.

**transportation** Though terms like ‘department of *transportation*’ are common in the US, *transport* is still the plainer term in British English except when referring to a punishment once meted out to sheep-stealers and the like.

**trope** This word, almost never heard before 2010, is common in political, philosophical, and artistic discussions, particularly on BBC Radio 4. Its usual dictionary meanings—a *figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression* or a *motif*—are rapidly being displaced, with most users giving it the pejorative meaning of *cliché* or *stereotype*, as in these examples: ‘It is a *trope* of every biology lesson that the

egg waits to be fertilised, while millions of sperm compete to claim her'; 'Some viewers said...the plot perpetuated the *trope* that Muslim women were controlled by their husbands.'; 'The *tropes* of blackness say that these people are lazy...and that their poverty is the result of bad choices' (*The Times*, 17 January 2018; 11 September 2018; and 4 December 2018). If you really mean *theme* or *topic*, though, use those words as they'll be better understood than *trope*, *motif*, *metaphor*, or *cliché*.

**unless and until** 'Unless and until the conditions are met, the deal is off'. This usage smells of lawyering. Either *unless* or *until* will do.

**whilst** This is becoming unusual (especially in American English). Its job has been usurped by *while*, with which it is interchangeable in standard English.

**within** In phrases like 'If you look *within* the box', the more concise *in* works well instead. This trivial change will often save a line of type, too.

**with regards to** The traditional expressions are *with regard to*, *in regard to*, and *as regards*. The bastard phrase *with regards to*, which marries *with regard to* and *give my regards to them*, is displacing the first two of these in popular use. Sticklers will cleave to *with regard to* and will surely flee screaming from *in regards on*, as used in this weak business email: 'I have been put in contact with you *in regards on* getting a quote of cost for you guys to plain English read a A4 leaflet with information front and back.'

## Words often confused

Your documents will seem inept if you muddle up similar-sounding words, so do check you've got them right. They sometimes trip up even experienced broadcasters and journalists.

- to **affect** is to alter or change ('Damage to the rudder *affected* the steering') or to pretend ('They *affected* not to listen').  
to **effect** is to do, make, implement, bring about, accomplish.  
an **affect** is an emotion, feeling, or desire. Psychopaths exhibit a lack of *affect*.  
an **effect** is a result or outcome.

- **criteria** is the plural of **criterion**.
- to **defuse** is to take out a fuse or, figuratively, to lessen tension, e.g. 'The row was *defused* by immediate action.'  
to **diffuse** is to spread widely ('It *diffused* optimism throughout the town').
- **desserts** are puddings, only (stressing its second syllable).  
**deserts** are what you deserve (e.g., stressing its second syllable, 'they got their just *deserts*'), or (stressing its first syllable) wastelands.
- **discreet** means tactful, secretive, trustworthy, circumspect.  
**discrete** means separate, individually distinct (and is rare).
- to **flaunt** is to act in a showy or brazen way.  
to **flout** is to disobey or show contempt for a law, etc.
- to **hone** means to polish, refine, sharpen ('They *honed* their blades and waited').  
to **home in** means to move in on or focus ('He *homed in* on this bright idea').
- to **imply** is to suggest or indicate ('She often *implied* she had a degree, but in fact had never graduated').  
to **infer** is to deduce or draw an inference from ('The pathologist *inferred* that the murder victim had had several children').
- **incidence** is the rate of occurrence, and is singular ('The *incidence* of HIV/AIDS is rising in the Baltic states').  
**incident** is an event.  
**instance** is an occasion or occurrence ('There have been several recent *instances* of needle-stick injuries').
- **it's** is short for *it is*.  
**its** means belonging to it, e.g. *its* wings are green.
- **minuscule** means tiny (and is a technical word for lower-case lettering), while **miniscule** doesn't exist, according to most dictionaries.
- to **mitigate** is to excuse or lessen the severity of ('His guilty plea *mitigated* the sentence').  
to **militate against** is to operate powerfully against ('The splashes of white paint *militated against* camouflage.'). It's easily remembered from *military*.
- to **moot** is to put forward or float an idea. As a noun, a **moot** is a type of legal debate. As an adjective, **moot**, as in 'it's a *moot* point', means debatable.  
to **mute** is to silence something or somebody. As a noun, a **mute** is an old-fashioned or offensive term for someone who cannot speak (the adjective 'non-verbal' is preferred today). If colours, say, are **muted**, they are understated.

- to **perpetuate** is to keep something going, e.g. a custom, belief, or myth.  
to **perpetrate** is to commit an act, e.g. 'They *perpetrated* many burglaries'.
- **phenomena** is the plural of **phenomenon**.
- a **principle** is a rule of conduct ('They lived according to their religious *principles*').  
**principal** as an adjective means main or chief ('Our *principal* aim is world domination'); or as a noun it's a sum of money on which interest is payable or the head of, say, a college.
- to **refute** and **rebut** mean to disprove by argument or evidence. The words they are often confused with, *deny*, *reject*, and *repudiate*, mean to dispute a statement without using argument or evidence.
- **reluctant** means unwilling ('I was *reluctant* to dance in public'), but **reticent** means reserved or unwilling to speak freely.
- a **restaurateur** is someone who runs a restaurant, while **restauranteur** doesn't exist.
- **they're** is short for *they are*.  
**their** means *belonging to them*, and **there** indicates a place.
- **to** is used in an infinitive (*to* change) and as a preposition ('they went *to* the lifeboats').  
**too** means *also*, e.g. 'Kushmira came along *too*'.
- **you're** is short for *you are*.  
**your** means belonging to you.



# | 4

## Using or avoiding foreign words

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**GUIDELINE** Choose only Latin or French that doesn't seem Latin or French.

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English is a greedy and mongrel language enriched for centuries by hundreds of direct borrowings like *caravan*, *trek*, *graffiti*, *bastard*, *clan*, *crag*, *criterion*, *phenomenon*, *slogan*, *corgi*, *garage*, and *armada*, and thousands of foreign-derived words such as *plant*, *fantasy*, *custom*, *interest*, *jury*, *mutton*, *bungalow*, and *tea*. The larger dictionaries show the foreign roots of many of our words, with perhaps 70 per cent having Latin or Greek ancestry. Plenty of them are easy and widely understood—they're part of the plain-English lexicon.

A few terms have kept some of their strangeness but are surely plain English now. In this group are *vice versa*, which saves several words of explanation (though *the other way round* may sometimes do), *per cent*, and *etc*. *Curriculum vitae* seems likely to endure as CV—the best alternative in American English is the French *résumé*, while in South East Asia the pleasing *biodata* is widespread and New Zealanders tend towards merely *bio*. The term *ad hoc* usefully fills a niche in phrases like *ad hoc group*, and nothing else says it better—but if it were tested among the population, I doubt it would be widely understood.

Terms like *e.g.*, *i.e.*, *per annum*, *per capita*, and *per diem* still cause confusion for a mass audience. Certainly, *i.e.* and *e.g.* are concise but fewer people can now distinguish between them because schools

rarely teach Latin—so the English equivalents are safer. Times have certainly changed since 1939, when *Mind the Stop*, a book on punctuation by G V Carey, began:

In writing this book I have had more especially in mind three classes of readers: those who, professionally or otherwise, are faced with the task of reading proofs; those who at school are learning to write English correctly (and perhaps a few of their teachers, *quorum pars parva fui*); and those ordinary folk—I have met plenty—who remark somewhat vaguely ‘I know nothing about punctuation.’

Most authors today would give a translation of the Latin phrase—it means *of which I was once one*. In 1999, the BBC dropped its award-winning science series *QED* because few viewers understood the title or its scientific connection. The BBC’s head of science told the *Daily Record*: ‘It’s not surprising that the audience didn’t have the faintest idea what it meant.’ The series was reborn as *Living Proof*, though its disappearance soon after suggests that the obscure title may not have been its only shortcoming.

Uncommon foreign-language terms won’t be well understood, so unless you’re sure of your audience, it’s best to avoid those words and phrases often seen in the literary-review pages like *oeuvre*, *homage*, *Bildungsroman*, *noir*, *fin de siècle*, *grandes horizontales*, *femme fatale*, and *auteur*. The news pages of popular dailies will rarely use such terms as *casus belli*, *modus operandi*, and *glasnost* because they will not be understood. Words of foreign origin relating to dress, decoration or religious practice such as *hijab*, *jilbab*, *burka*, *niqab*, *patka*, *bindi*, *kohl*, *kippah*, *yarmulke*, *kosher*, *shalwar kameez*, *halal*, and *haram* are slowly becoming better understood in the wider UK population. In essential information, though, foreign-language terms are best omitted, or explained in words or pictures. Online dictionaries, of course, give instant access to meanings for those who are willing to make the effort.

If you’re creating a guidance booklet or manual, calling it a *vade mecum* (Latin) or *aide-memoire* (French) is unhelpful. As for academic writing, an article in the *Johns Hopkins Magazine* (Waller R and Kern T H, 1991) told students: ‘Avoid using the Latin terms *ibid.*, *op cit.*, and

*loc cit.* Odds are, you don't know what they really mean, and neither do most professors.'

Latin still fights a rearguard action on the British £1 coin, where until about 2016 it was more heavily represented than English or Welsh with phrases like *Nemo me impune lacessit* ('No one harms me and gets away with it') and *Decus et tutamen* ('Glory and protection'). On £2 coins, first generally circulated in 1998, English is rampant. They quote Isaac Newton ('standing on the shoulders of giants'), refer to I K Brunel ('so many irons in the fire'), adapt Churchill ('in peace goodwill in victory magnanimity'—punctuation not being easy on coins), and, more prosaically, state 'Rugby World Cup 1999', and '1514 Trinity House 2014' referring to 500 years of lighthouses. Tendring District Council backs both horses with an official crest offering Latin with an English translation: *Pro bono omnium*, 'For the good of all'.

After the then Manchester United footballer Wayne Rooney was hurt in 2012, his sponsors gave him a T-shirt printed with the Latin *Virescit Vulnere Virtus*. Rooney, not previously known as a classical scholar, glossed this impressively as 'Courage grows through injury.'

Term from Latin or French [F]	Meaning or alternative term
ad hoc	for this purpose or occasion
à propos de [F]	about, concerning, with respect to
bona fide	in good faith
carte blanche [F]	freedom, you are free to do x
cause célèbre [F]	controversial cause
ceteris paribus	other things being equal
cf. ( <i>confer</i> , imperative of <i>conferre</i> )	compare
circa (c.)	about

Term from Latin or French [F]	Meaning or alternative term
de minimis	trivialities, small amounts
e.g. ( <i>exempli gratia</i> )	such as, for example
en bloc [F]	as a whole, together
en suite [F: 'in succession']]	bathroom in, or adjoining, a bedroom
etc. ( <i>et cetera</i> )	and so on, and the rest
ex officio	because of the office held
faux pas [F: 'false step']	social slip/mistake, etiquette error
fin de siècle [F]	end of the century
ibid. ( <i>ibidem</i> )	in the same place, book, etc.; same source
i.e. ( <i>id est</i> )	that is
in situ	in its current place/position, where it is now
inter alia/alios	among other things/people
loc. cit. ( <i>loco citato</i> )	in the passage cited above
modus operandi	way of working, method
mutatis mutandis	with the necessary changes
op. cit. ( <i>opere citato</i> )	in the work quoted
per annum	per year, a year, annually
per capita	per head, per person, each
per diem	per day, a day, daily
per se	as such, by or in itself, essentially
persona non grata	unacceptable or unwanted person
per stirpes [through the roots]	distribution to representatives of the dead

Cont. ►

Term from Latin or French [F]	Meaning or alternative term
p.p. ( <i>per procurationem</i> )	on behalf of, by the agency of
pro forma	a form
QED	proved as required
q.v. ( <i>quod vide</i> )	see
seriatim	one at a time, in the same order
[sic]	thus! (pointing out an error)
sine die	indefinitely
vice	instead of
vis-à-vis [F]	as regards, regarding, on, about
viz. ( <i>videlicet</i> )	namely
vs ( <i>versus</i> )	v, versus, against
v.s. ( <i>vide supra</i> )	see above

## Undoing knotty noun strings

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**GUIDELINE** *Untie noun strings.*

---

In most well-written sentences, nouns tend not to lie next to each other. If they are bundled together by an unthinking author, they may spawn that loathsome love child of business writing, the noun string—also called the noun plague. Here are some examples of this piling up of (mainly) nouns that modify other nouns:

- National Performance Framework Service Delivery Plan
- Employee Job Consultation (Appraisal) Scheme
- community capacity enhancement initiative
- Voluntary Accidental Death and Dismemberment Plan
- affordable housing special/specific needs provision targets
- advanced practice succession planning development pathway

and, in a local council's job advertisement with comic potential:

- Teenage Pregnancy Implementation Manager.

In some of those examples, adjectives are present—*Voluntary Accidental*, *affordable*, and *advanced* but they do little to improve clarity. The pile-up of modifying words disrupts the reader's ability to predict, which is so important for smooth reading.

In *Garner's Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 2016), Bryan Garner suggests readability plummets with a triple noun string, but 'the plague is unendurable when four nouns appear consecutively'. Annetta Cheek gives this remarkable example of a double noun-string sentence

in a bank's letter to a customer: 'You have exceeded the *federal banking regulation transaction number* for *excessive money market pre-authorized automatic electronic debit transactions*.' She concludes that noun strings 'make ... text seem dense, ponderous, and at times pretentious'.

What to do about noun strings? Break them up, of course, often with prepositions. Instead of *service user suggestion scheme*, try *suggestion scheme for our service users*. Instead of *advanced practice development needs analysis tool*, try *needs analysis tool for advanced practice development* (though this still boasts two triple noun strings). Instead of *Northern Ireland Personal Current Account Banking Market Investigation Order* try *Market Investigation Order on Personal Current Bank Accounts in Northern Ireland*.

In other words, try to discern what the noun string means (if anything), then add new words to help readers get the idea. Usually the result will be longer, but much clearer.

# 16

## Reducing cross-references

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**GUIDELINE** *Cross-references mean cross readers, so minimize them.*

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The government has sent me a 26-page application form that includes 183 questions, 70 separate paragraphs of notes, and about 125 cross-references from questions to notes. A tax schedule to the Finance No 2 Act of 1992 includes about 40 internal cross-references, forwards and backwards. In both cases, I need the skills of a pinball wizard to keep track.

In any complex document some cross-references are inevitable but they should be minimized; otherwise this kind of horror from a pension policy is the likely result:

In the event of the policyholder being alive on the vesting date and having given (or being deemed to have given) appropriate notice in accordance with provision 11.4 the provisions set out in this provision 5 shall apply provided that where by reason of the policy-holder's exercise of the option under provision 6.2 or 6.3 the vesting date is a day which is not the specified date, provision 5 shall apply subject to any consequential alterations arising under the relevant part of provision 6.

Applying plain-English guidelines can't improve this very much. The only hope is to scrap it and start again. If the point can't be made in a way that people can understand, it may not be worth making at all: the scheme underlying the policy might need to be simplified.

Skins of cross-references are not always so hopelessly tangled. Here's an example from an investment policy:



If you choose to receive income payments from your investment within the policy, subject as provided in clause 12, income (including tax credits) will be paid to you (subject to such sums being available first to pay any sums due to Unicorn Unit Trusts Limited under clause 9) monthly or quarterly and at any level you choose between a minimum of 5 per cent and a maximum of 10 per cent (in increments of 0.5 per cent) based on either a percentage of your original investment or the value of your policy at the time you choose to start making withdrawals.

As this is a 101-word sentence, the prospects don't look good at first but we can start by isolating the main points:

- 1 If you have chosen to draw income from the investment, we'll pay it to you, monthly or quarterly.
- 2 How much we pay you could be affected by clause 12 and by Unicorn's charges set out in clause 9.
- 3 We'll pay you whatever percentage you choose—within certain limits—of your original investment or of the value of your investment at the time you start to make withdrawals.

By putting these points in 1–3–2 order, we can group the cross-references into a separate sentence at the end. The result might say this, using short sentences and paragraphs:

If you choose to draw income payments from your investment in the policy, we'll pay them to you monthly or quarterly. The payments will include tax credits.

The payments you choose must be a percentage of your original investment or of the value of your investment at the time you start receiving the income. Your choice of percentage must be at least 5 per cent but not more than 10 per cent (using 0.5 per cent steps).

Payments are subject to clause 12. They are available first to pay any money owed to Unicorn Unit Trusts Limited under clause 9.

This is still not simple because the ideas are complicated and, though the number of words is the same, they take more space. But now the readers have a much better chance of getting the drift, and can ask sensible questions if they want to know more.

On the Web, some forms seem to have designed out most cross-references. The software responds to users' answers by determining the questions that come next. As a result, the online British passport renewal form (2018) seems a masterpiece of clarity, while its paper equivalent remains a complex of preset snakes and ladders.

# 17

## Exploring and exploding some writing myths

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**GUIDELINE** *Avoid being enslaved by writing myths.*

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An author once told me she'd been instructed by her English teacher never to begin consecutive paragraphs with the same letter of the alphabet. After thirty years of following this alleged rule, she asked whether I thought she should continue.

A writer's path is steep enough without being burdened by such schoolroom mythology. This chapter examines some of the most tenacious non-rules.

Myth 1: Never start a sentence with 'But' (or similar conjunctions)

This is neither a rule of grammar nor even a widely observed convention. Yet the myth is hardy: even as late as 2008 I was nearly defenestrated by a bunch of lawyers for suggesting they should occasionally begin sentences with *But* instead of *However* or *On the other hand*. The myth may stem from primary-school teachers who, reasonably enough, seek to persuade children to connect the sentence fragments they tend to write.

Most influential authors in the last few hundred years have ignored the myth. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft regularly uses *But* and *And* at the start of sentences (though they do little to clarify her high-flown style). Jane Austen, a

literary great, occasionally begins sentences with *And*, in the sense of *Furthermore*, and commonly uses *But* in the same position. Here's a typical example from *Mansfield Park* (1814), where *But* shortens her first sentence and heightens its contrast with the ironic second:

She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation [marriage to a supposed social superior]; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. *But* there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them.

*But*, like most conjunctions, signals a shift in pace, direction, or viewpoint, as in this modern example from the journalist Libby Purves who, for emphasis, begins the final sentence with *And*:

The children of MPs, royalty, journalists and other moral prodnoses do not need to read underclass horror-stories to find out about the lifestyle problems which adult sexuality inflicts on children. They are familiar with it all: access arrangements, vendettas, embarrassment, lawsuits, confusion, hypocrisy. 'I believe strenuously,' says Mrs Nicholson [a British MP], 'that every child deserves a mother and father'; and so say all of us. *But* the plain fact is that not every child has them to hand. *And* in family life, the golden rule is to start from where you are.

Even old-time grammarians began sentences with *But*. If it had been a real rule, they wouldn't have done so. J C Nesfield, in his *Manual of English Grammar and Composition* (1915)—a 423-page small-print textbook for Edwardian 14-year-olds—says:

It is convenient for the sake of brevity to say that 'a conjunction joins words to words, and sentences to sentences'. *But* this is not enough for the purposes of definition.

People sometimes plead that starting with *But* is unbusinesslike; yet there's nothing so special about business English that means the norm for every other kind of writing should be ignored. If, however, you are thwarted by managers who insist on obeying their long-dead school-teachers, you could slyly use *Yet* as an alternative. It will often do the job and has the twin merits of simplicity and underuse.

Some people like to extend their *But* ban to *So*, *Because*, *And*, and *However*. This is equally absurd. *So* is a great help to slow typists, being a crisp alternative to *Consequently*, *Therefore*, and *As a result*:

So it would seem that the courts may override the words which the parties have used, in the process of interpreting a written contract, despite the powerful authorities which I have mentioned. [Sir Christopher Staughton, former Lord Justice of Appeal, England and Wales, writing in *Clarity* 50, pp 24–29]

Seamus Heaney's fine modern translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* (1999) begins with the dramatic one-word sentence, *So*, and there are six other sentences starting with *So* in his first eight pages. Hilary Moriarty, in the *Daily Telegraph* (2004), writes:

I may be a headteacher now, but I am an English teacher to the bone, with an honours degree in English, a master's in 20th-century English and American literature and more than 30 years in the classroom. So how come I do not recognise a single poem in the selection of eight my son is studying for his rapidly approaching GCSE in English?

It's also harmless to begin sentences with *Because* as an alternative to *As* and *Since*. To write 'Because we want the project to succeed, we're willing to work overtime' is as grammatically sound as 'We're willing to work overtime because we want the project to succeed.' Every teacher knows this; yet many in secondary schools and universities continue to peddle the myth they heard as 9-year-olds. Even an occasional *Or* can be used as a crisp first-word alternative to *Alternatively*.

While obedience to myth may produce stale writing, advertisers and journalists sometimes write incomplete sentences in their desire for brevity, for example:

In truth, the British sandwich is now worse than ever. Because both the key elements, the bread and the filling, are invariably poor, and their quality is made worse by the methods of production. [*Daily Mail*, 2004]

The *Because* at the start of the second sentence misleads readers, who, thinking there'll be a second part, crash unaware into the full stop. Better to have omitted the first full stop and let the sentence run.

To begin a sentence with *And*—in the sense of *Furthermore*—is common among journalists and novelists who want its extra dramatic effect; yet it remains rare among business writers. Here, Philip Howard of *The Times*, writing in 2004 about the altered meanings of military metaphors like ‘putting yourself in the firing line’, uses *And so* (meaning *Thus*) to begin a sentence:

The first citation of the phrase comes from our defeat by the Boers at Majuba in 1881: “General Stewart was obliged to put every reserve man into the firing line.” As rifles became more accurate, it was no longer necessary or tactically sensible to concentrate your rifles into a firing line. *And so* our firing line has changed from attackers to targets.

Moriarty, in her piece mentioned above, also includes a sentence starting with *And*:

Now, key scenes are identified, and it’s horribly likely that, in many classes, those are the only ones that get taught. Pass the exam, blow the literature. *And* who can wonder if our very best students find it ridiculously easy?

The device is not new, even in prose that purples at the edges. Reporting the British queen’s coronation in 1953, *The Times* wrote:

*And* already waiting for her, on every stretch of her way to and from the Abbey, is the homage of which flag and symbol and flower are no more than an expression—the love and loyal service of her people.

In his acclaimed biography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1989), Richard Holmes regularly begins sentences and paragraphs with *And*, *But*, and *Because*. If it were bad English, the critics would have slaughtered him. When so many able writers disregard these myths, the best advice is that you may start a sentence with any word you want, as long as it hangs together as a complete statement. *The Times* even wrote an editorial about it (alluding, in its second sentence, to a phrase used by Sir Walter Scott):

*But* of course you can start an editorial with a ‘but.’ *But* us no buts. The Bible is full of the usage. *But* the taboo against it is a lingering superstition, dreamed up by

prescriptive Victorian grammarians who tried to make English run on railway lines instead of an open road.

### Myth 2: Never put a comma before 'and'

Many folk insist that putting a comma before *and* is bad. Ignore them, as Nesfield did in his grammar textbook quoted under Myth 1. Though a comma is usually unnecessary before *and*, it may help readers to see how the sentence is to be interpreted, or make them pause for a moment. This is because *and* can be a separator or a joiner. Here are a few examples:

It was a bright cold day in **April, and** the clocks were striking thirteen. [First line of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*]

Parents shop around. They send for a clutch of prospectuses, see what's available in both the public and private **sectors, and** are prepared to switch their children between the two at different stages in their education. [*The Times*, 1994]

When I assumed command of the Eighth Army I said that the mandate was to destroy Rommel and his **Army, and that** it would be done as soon as we were ready. We are ready NOW. [Field Marshal Montgomery of Alamein, eve-of-battle message, 1942]

When we met last night, you explained that you no longer wished me to remain as Secretary of State for **Education, and** I am writing to say how glad I have been to serve in Her Majesty's Government. [Resignation letter: John Patten to the British prime minister, 1994]

And here is Beatrix Potter, in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*:

He found a door in a wall; but it was **locked, and** there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath.

See also chapter 10, under 'Comma', about the use of a comma before the final *and* in a list.

### Myth 3: Never end a sentence with a preposition

A few people still believe it's bad grammar to end a sentence with words like *on*, *in*, *out*, *down*, *at*, *to*, and *over* (usually, these are *prepositions*—see chapter 11). The poet John Dryden probably started the myth in a

17th-century essay. Its continuing force was ably stated by a letter writer to the *Mail on Sunday* in 2005:

I vividly recall two items of English grammar that were drummed into me— that there are 26 letters (including a T) in our alphabet and that *one should not end a sentence with a preposition*... Yet... prominent newscasters and presenters frequently end their sentences with prepositions, although alternative phrasing is readily available.

And this nonsense is still being taught in schools. In *Could Do Better! Help your Child Shine at School* (London, 2007), the secondary school Teacher of the Year for 2004 unwittingly put his finger on the snobbery and one-upmanship of this variety of stickling: 'It is still perceived in some educational establishments as being the height of naughtiness, and is clearly the kind of grammar up with which any English teacher worth his salt will not put. To rid yourself of this unappealing habit [etc.].' The teacher then instructs readers how to alter this sentence, which he thinks comes to a bad end: 'Jimmy came first: Joseph came after.' He suggests they change it to 'Jimmy came first. After, Joseph came.'—which is as unspeakable as it is unreadable. Moreover, grammarians will know that *after* isn't even a preposition in the original sentence—it's an adverb.

What torment it must be for pedants to open their *Hamlet* at Act 3 Scene 1 and find Shakespeare breaking the alleged rule in the most famous soliloquy in English:

To die, to sleep—/No more; and by a sleep to say we end/The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir *to*.

—then to notice the *Daily Mail* columnist and playwright Keith Waterhouse doing the same:

I can only imagine that Saddam needed that clock to stare *at*. [2003]

—and then to see a *Daily Telegraph* sketch writer, Andrew Gimson, catching the bug:

Initiation through hardship is the British way. The general idea is to be atrociously brutal to recruits, not so much because one enjoys flogging them (though that could be an incidental advantage), but in order to find out what sort of stuff they are made *of*. [2004]



In fact, when using a conversational style that adopts some of the rhythms of speech, it's normal to end a few sentences with prepositions. For example, it seems harmless to write:

- There are certain values that people should all be prepared to stand up *for*.
- The company decided this was the right system to invest *in*.
- It is very important to ensure you have listed everyone you owe money *to*.

It's true that the first could be recast as:

There are certain values for which people should all be prepared to stand up.

—but this would still annoy anyone who thinks *up* is a preposition here (actually it's a particle, an essential bit of the verb *stand up*). There's no point changing a sentence that reads well, sounds right, and says what the writer wants to say, just because it contravenes the myth. Of course, some sentences ending in prepositions *do* need to be recast, but this is because they read awkwardly, not because they break a rule. These sentences, for example, come to a feeble end:

Get clean photocopies of the forms you want to make changes to. Make sure there's enough white space to mark your alterations *on*.

Better to write:

Get clean photocopies of the forms you want to change. Make sure there's enough white space for marking your alterations.

Also a bit feeble is this from the *Daily Mail* (2005) about handwriting:

The main problem is that many of the teachers and parents weren't taught to write properly themselves. It's a vicious circle in urgent need of being broken *into*.

—just omit the final word.

Myth 4: Never split your infinitives

Splitting the infinitive means putting a word or phrase between *to* and the verb word, as in:

The department wants to *more than* double its budget.

The passengers were asked to *carefully* get down from the train.

If you think a sentence will be more emphatic, clear, or rhythmical, **you should split the infinitive**—there's no reason in logic or grammar to avoid it. The examples above seem better split than not. Take care, though, lest the gap between *to* and the verb word becomes too great, as the reader may lose track of the meaning.

An editorial in *The Times* says:

The most diligent search can find no modern grammarian to *pedantically*, to *dogmatically*, to *invariably* condemn a split infinitive. Rules are created to aid the communication of meaning. In the cause of meaning they can sometimes be broken.

Though good, this encourages the idea that to split an infinitive is to break a rule. There is no such rule, merely a superstition that arose in the nineteenth century when grammarians sought to impose Latin rules on English. In Latin, a present-tense infinitive is always a single, unsplittable word: *amare*, *cantare*, *audire*.

There's more good news. An ardent defender of the split-infinitive myth, the *Daily Telegraph*, has hoisted the white flag. In an editorial on 31 July 1995 the paper had condemned the first edition of this book as the devil's work (I exaggerate only slightly) for its view that split infinitives were OK. Yet on 12 December 2006 its leader writer Christopher Howse posted a blog headed 'Why on earth do people think that splitting an infinitive is wrong?' and remarked:

When writing journalism I generally avoid a split infinitive because it annoys people, *but there is no grammatical objection to it*. The best reason objectors seem to find is that they were taught not to do it at school. It is no use arguing that an adverb between 'to' and the infinitive form of the verb is illogical, or breaks up a semantic whole.

You might imagine there'd be nobody so boring as to have recorded examples of the *Telegraph's* split infinitives from 1995 to the date of surrender. You'd be wrong, though, so here are a few from my collection: *to twice trip them up*; *to more than double the amount of energy*; *to suddenly become inspired*; *his 42-year-old knees started to really creak*; *to seemingly last the course better*; *to instantly place him among the pantheon*; *to radically reform the Independent*; and *to still earn his devotion*.

Sometimes a ghostly memory of the newspaper's anti-splitting history surfaces, as in:

A woman caught hepatitis B and died after surgeons *failed properly to clean* a probe which had been used on an infected patient minutes earlier, an inquest heard.  
[6 September 2012]

The carefully unsplit infinitive has produced the absurdity of the saw-bones *failing properly* to do something. It would have been clearer and more natural to write 'surgeons *failed to properly clean* a probe'.

If you can't bring yourself to split an infinitive, at least allow others the freedom to do so. And by the way, phrases like 'I easily won the race' and 'he quickly drove away' do not split infinitives because no infinitive is present.

Myth 5: Never write a one-sentence paragraph

If you can say what you want to say in a single sentence that lacks a direct connection with any other sentence, just stop there and go on to a new paragraph. There's no rule against it. A paragraph can be a single sentence, whether long, short, or middling.

Myth 6: Write as you speak

This advice is widely heard, but take it with a large pinch of salt. True, many authors would benefit from making their writing more conversational, using more personal pronouns and active verbs. But this is not the same as writing as you speak. Most of us don't speak in complete sentences—a transcript of what we say usually reads like gibberish on the page. Even what is uttered in the UK parliament is tidied up by *Hansard* editors so it makes some kind of sense. Good, clear writing is much more than speech transcribed: it's speech organized, worked, and refined for smooth reading.

# 18

## Avoiding clichés

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**GUIDELINE** *Avoid using clichés.*

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If you utter ‘home sweet home’ when returning to base, ‘that’s a no-brainer’ when faced with an obvious course of action, and ‘it’s the elephant in the room’ when everyone’s avoiding the big issue, you’ve been colonized by clichés—once fresh expressions whose overuse has made them drab. In written work, using them to excess—or even at all—invites clever Dicks to regard you as dull and unoriginal. So although a cliché’s meaning may be plain enough, it can put off the critical reader. That’s why clichés are best avoided, tempting though they are.

Unmolested by subeditors, clichés abound in business newsletters, sports journalism, chief-officer speeches, business reports, estate-agent descriptions, and adverts of all kinds. Here flourish *hive of activity, rolling hills, green and pleasant land, fresh as a daisy, went down like a lead balloon, leaving no stone unturned, grinding poverty, tip of the iceberg, crack of dawn, has the benefit of central heating, doesn’t suffer fools gladly, enough is enough, game of two halves, only time will tell, it’s been a challenging year, fundamentally flawed, to be honest* (as if to warn of a brief deviation from habitual lying), *mass exodus* (when is an exodus not mass?), *stark choice, sneak preview, winter wonderland, and haven for wildlife.*

Although *over the moon* (meaning ‘delighted’—or, in Botswana, ‘pregnant’, so be careful there) and *sick as a parrot* (unhappy) have almost been sneered to extinction, *it’s not rocket science* remains a widespread cliché, preloaded on the tongue of many a public figure

alongside we need to put this into perspective, lessons have been learned, that's a very good question, I'd first like to extend my condolences to the family, we take all complaints very seriously, and our thoughts and prayers are with the family at this difficult time.

Estate agents delight in coupling the cliché *a wealth of* with such things as *oak beams*, *charming features*, *possibilities for renovation*, and *breathtaking views*. But if you like using *a wealth of*, at least connect it with something positive, unlike this absurdity from a heating company's mailshot:

This protection plan covers your heating system and *a wealth of* other emergencies in your home.

Business clichés sometimes overstrain for effect, such as *pushing the envelope* (test-pilot jargon for exceeding the limits), *thinking outside the box* (looking for the unorthodox answer), and *running this up the flag-pole and seeing if it flies* (trying out or floating an idea). However, I can't bring myself to decry such phrases as *blue-sky thinking* (searching for novel possibilities), *getting all our ducks in a row* (having everything/everyone ready/agreed), *singing from the same song sheet* (people taking the same line), and *picking the low-hanging fruit* (taking the easy wins first). At least these benefit from vivid imagery as well as being easily understood.

If accused of cliché excess, you could try the *Iliad* defence. This argues that the beautiful phrases of Homer (that's the poet of Ancient Greece, not the *Simpsons* character) like *wine-dark sea* and *rosy-fingered dawn* can bear endless repetition. The *Iliad* was originally spoken, not written, so Homer's stock epithets were crucial memory aids—in a different league, his apologists would say, from 'At the end of the day, Hector and Achilles weren't fighting on a level playing field.'

Similes like *flat as a pancake*, *cool as a cucumber*, *dull as ditchwater*, *bald as a coot*, and *cold as charity* are so clichéd that authors can subvert them for punning effect. If cows stray on to the field during the village soccer match, it could be a *game of two calves* (but only if there were two of them). If a detective falls ill, he could be *as sick as a Poirot*. If

your bread fails to rise, it might be *as dead as a dough-dough*. If you hurl brickbats at hate figures, you might be *leaving no turd unstoned*. But these are wordplays where the audience needs to get the joke, so their main purpose is to amuse, not inform. They are plain English only for the in-crowd.

One cliché that's gaining strength must surely bring a shudder to everyone with a sensitive ear. (Not *they've got a yen for*... in articles about the Japanese, grim though that is.) It's a phrase that often appears in restaurant reviews, where the meal is said to have been *washed down* with some pleasant bottle of wine, as if the diners were cleaning their cars not slaking their thirst. It evokes the revolting picture of millions of food particles being sluiced through the oesophagus.

It's hard not to play cliché bingo when reading some newspapers. Here, I've italicized the four clichés that appeared in the space of only 27 words in one of them:

*In days gone by, Buxton Market was a hive of activity—a renowned jewel in the town's crown. Now, it is a shadow of its former self.*

And here are several uses of the same gardening cliché from a single issue of the same paper: *Green-fingered growers showed off the fruits of their labours at Whaley Bridge Show* (page 1); *Green-fingered Trevor's gardens* (page 2); *Buxton shows off its green-fingered spirit* (page 7); and *green-fingered gardeners showed off the fruits of their labours at two produce shows over the weekend* (page 8).

It's partly laziness. For example, *emotional* has become the go-to cliché for a wide range of circumstances when people feel moved, upset, happy, delighted, shocked, saddened, tearful, anxious, or grief-stricken. It's better to specify the emotions—if the person is sorrowful, joyous, or weeping with delight, say so. Here are some *emotional* examples from the newspapers, but the cliché is also widespread on social media:

- 'Coleman's *emotional* response—a sprint, a theatrical slide and hands-cupped-to-ears gesture—spoke not only of the 30-year-old's relief at

returning to goalscoring but also his response to recent criticism he has received from Everton supporters.’ At least this describes how the footballer emoted—with a triply clichéd celebration—but that just shows how redundant *emotional* can be, since the sentence means the same without it. (*The Times* 5 November 2018)

- ‘In an *emotional* statement read out to the hearing, Ms Forster said: “I’m still haunted day and night by the horrors of Harriet’s death.”’ Again, *emotional* is redundant because the speaker’s statement is clearly laden with her feelings, so the word adds nothing. It’s part of a journalistic style that insists on directing readers how to react to a story. (*The Times*, 8 November 2018)
- ‘The *emotional* video captures the poignant moment when a widower meets the mother of a young family who has received his late wife’s heart through a transplant.’ Here, *emotional* adds nothing to *poignant*. (*Buxton Advertiser*, 21 February 2019)

All writers need an inbuilt censor to apply the cliché test, which is simply that if you’ve heard or read the expressions many times before and they sound proverbial or rooted in management jargon, they’re probably clichés. Here’s a short list of them.

- add insult to injury
- all Greek to me
- all in a day’s work
- as good as gold
- ballpark figure
- baptism of fire
- bat out of hell
- behind the eight ball
- big fish in a small pond
- bite the dust
- blast from the past
- blessing in disguise
- blushing bride
- bone of contention
- bull in a china shop
- calls a spade a spade
- chattering classes
- clear as a bell
- cool as a cucumber
- crack of dawn
- dead as a doornail/dodo
- early bird catches the worm
- every fibre of my being
- fresh as a daisy
- from time immemorial
- green and pleasant land
- green-eyed monster
- green fingers
- grinding poverty
- hard as nails
- inextricably linked
- it’s a nightmare

- it's not all doom and gloom
- jewel in the crown
- jury is still out
- kiss of death
- lap of luxury
- let's boil the ocean (i.e. try the impossible)
- level playing field
- life-affirming
- light at the end of the tunnel
- luck of the Irish
- nose to the grindstone
- ongoing situation
- only time will tell
- perfect storm
- pillar of society
- rolling hills/dales/moors/countryside
- safe and sound
- shadow of [his/her] former self
- sixty-four-thousand-dollar question
- solid as a rock
- stark choice
- step up to the plate
- the devil's in the detail
- this day and age
- this is what [x] is all about
- tip of the iceberg
- too close to call
- trials and tribulations
- up for grabs
- whole new [ballgame, etc.]

Finally, if you're in a soft job, macho clichés are pretentious and best avoided, e.g. *I wouldn't die in a ditch for it; she's on the front line every day; and it's tough at the coalface*. So instead of *we're caught between a rock and a hard place*, why not use *we're in a dilemma* or *none of our options are good*? They are clear, concise, and free of bragging.



# 19

## Pitching your writing at the right level

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**GUIDELINE** *Remember that the population's average reading age is about 13.*

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Your writing is likely to be ignored or misunderstood if the intended readers find it too long or complex. Don't overestimate their level of reading skill and perseverance. If you're writing for a mass audience, pitch it at or below the average person's level of reading skill.

But how do you know what the average person can read or will persevere with? Thinking about what you yourself find difficult will help, but if you move in a highly literate world where people know an apostrophe from a semicolon or can distinguish *discreet* and *discrete*, you may be out of touch with what most folk choose to read. And most of us prefer to regard people who can't understand our writing as being ill-educated or unwilling to persevere rather than to pitch it lower.

It helps if we jettison the 'gaining marks' mindset, which is a hangover from school and university. No more are we writing to impress a teacher with our profound knowledge and command of detail. Instead, we're trying to help people grasp or explore a topic they may know little about, and the writing skills are very different. This chapter looks at:

- the average reading age of UK and US adults (about 13 years)
- examples of text written at the UK and US average level
- readability tests that can help you check the level of difficulty.

### Average reading age

By definition, a 13-year-old child with average reading ability has a reading age of 13. Skilful teachers can pick a particular book and be reasonably sure it will be readable by an average 13-year-old, though whether the topic will interest them is another matter.

For adults also, it's convenient to use reading age as a proxy for reading ability. A reading age of 16 will be adequate for most daily purposes. Few people will have a reading age much beyond 21. A person's reading age changes little after they stop full-time education unless a job or pastime requires them to read harder material. Their reading age may decline if they read little.

The UK's National Literacy Trust website shows what research has found on adult reading ages. If we ignore people who can read little or nothing in English, the figures suggest a national average of 15–16. If we err towards pessimism and accept that most people prefer to read material that's below their reading-age level, then the average UK adult has a reading age of 12–14, say 13 to keep things simple (US school grade 8). This equates to three years below the current legal UK school-leaving age. This is my best estimate only, and adults may bring prior knowledge to a reading task that a typical 13-year-old will lack.

Thirteen is certainly not a high level, being only two or three reading-age years above the generally accepted definition of **functional literacy**—the level people need to cope with everyday life. (About five million UK adults may be below this level.) We need to be wary of wilder estimates that are sometimes touted, though. One British company in the plain-language field has put the average reading age at 9.5 (US grade 4–5). This would mean the average Briton, after at least twelve years of formal schooling, was nearly two years below functional-literacy level. Were the figure true, it would mean that much of the education budget for the last fifty years had been wasted, but there's nothing to support it in adult-literacy research. The National Audit Office regards the average adult as being at 'level 1' for literacy, using Department for Education and Skills figures from 2003. Level 1 equates roughly to a reading age of 13–15.

## Examples of text written at the average level

To show what level to aim at for a mass audience, the two following passages from schoolbooks are at about reading age 13 (US grade 8), though I'd say the second is more difficult than the first:

1/While all this is happening, the embryo is getting longer. Now the tail bud begins to develop, and the embryo develops suckers beneath the place where the mouth will be. Although it is only about twenty-eight hours old and barely recognizable as a tadpole, the embryo now hatches. Toad embryos emerge very early, while frog and salamander embryos are further along when they come out of their jelly prisons. The small embryos hang by the suckers to the jelly. It will be five more hours before they can move their muscles at all.

When they are a little more than a day and a half old, their hearts begin to beat. Soon the blood begins to circulate through the gills, the developing eyes can be seen, the mouth opens, and the suckers begin to disappear. At two and a half days of age, when the blood starts circulating in the tail, they really look like tadpoles.

[Patent, D H (1975) *Frogs, Toads, Salamanders, and How They Reproduce* (New York)]

2/As we have seen, a neutron star would be small and dense. It should also be rotating rapidly. All stars rotate, but most of them do so leisurely. For example, our Sun takes nearly one month to rotate around its axis. A collapsing star speeds up as its size shrinks, just as an ice-skater during a pirouette speeds up when she pulls in her arms. This phenomenon is a direct consequence of a law of physics known as the conservation of angular momentum, which holds that the total amount of angular momentum in a system holds constant. An ordinary star rotating once a month would be spinning faster than once a second if compressed to the size of a neutron star. In addition to having rapid rotation, we expect a neutron star to have an intense magnetic field. It is probably safe to say that every star has a magnetic field of some strength.

[Kaufmann, W J (1990) *Discovering the Universe* (pub. W H Freeman)]

The first example has an average sentence length of 17.5 and there's only one passive-voice verb (*be seen*). The second has a similar average sentence length and no passives.

So these examples are typical of what the average adult can read. Remember, though, that plenty of people are reading below this level. Therefore, if you can clarify things further without losing the flow or resorting to childish language, so much the better.

In the UK, mass-market material like *The Sun*, *Mirror*, and *Reader's Digest* are all written at a little above this level (UK reading age 14, US grade 9) according to Bill DuBay, who used readability tests to check a 4,000-word sample of each for his book *Smart Language* (2007). I used similar tests to analyse a *Times* editorial headed *The risks of currency weakness* (21 November 2008). It needs a reading age of about 17. Its average sentence length is 20 words, which helps to compensate for fairly high-level vocabulary. Even for a well-educated audience, it's unwise to be writing much above this level.

Readability tests that can help you check the level of difficulty

Several formulas aim to measure the readability of writing. Most use only two variables to produce a score: sentence length and vocabulary load (such as word length or rarity). The score corresponds to that of texts needing known levels of reading skill to achieve (typically) 80 per cent comprehension.

Microsoft Word includes two readability calculators, Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level. The program can also

<b>Flesch Reading Ease score</b>	<b>UK reading age</b>	<b>Equivalent US grade (Flesch–Kincaid grade level)</b>
90–100	10	5
80–90	11	6
70–80	12	7
60–70	13–14	8–9
50–60	15–17	10–12
30–50	18–21*	13–16*
0–30	Graduate*	Graduate*

\* A fault in older versions of Word prevents Flesch–Kincaid scores above US school grade 12.

calculate the average sentence length and the percentage of passives. However, the Word score ignores any text (say, headings and bullet points) that lacks sentence-end punctuation like full stops and question marks. Word's readability scoring can be helpful if you use the table above to interpret it. The StyleWriter editing program sold by Editor Software Ltd includes other ways of scoring readability. The website <<http://www.readabilityformulas.com>> offers free readability-checking tools.

### Drawbacks and uses of readability tests

The formulas are blunt tools. They ignore the way text is organized, how it looks on the page, and the reader's motivation and level of prior knowledge. They only hint at how to write a text better, and they encourage the idea that a clear document is one that scores well on the formula. Most tests don't discriminate between easy long words like *immediately* and hard ones like *esoteric*. Because *consider* has three syllables, authors seeking a good score on the formula are tempted to use *think about*, *look at*, or *mull over*. But *consider* is an easy word according to the research (see, for example, *The Living Word Vocabulary* by E Dale and J O'Rourke, 1979). A test like Smog (a simplified version of the Fog Index) relies mainly on syllable counting for its scores, so authors addicted to the tests tend to think they must omit most long words. This can lead to wordy writing in which a phrase like 'if you abandon your home' becomes 'if you quit your home without telling us', just to avoid a three-syllable word. Authors who catch the single-syllable bug will even replace a simple word like *explain* with *tell you about*, or replace *contact you* with *get in touch with you*. These changes are wordier and achieve nothing.

Test scores correspond to those for texts requiring known reading levels. These 'normed' texts come from well-written published books that are grammatically sound, well punctuated, and logically sequenced, like those above on tadpoles and neutron stars. So unless what you write is similarly coherent, you can get a false impression of its clarity. The Flesch tests will give the same score to any two 10-sentence

passages with, say, 12 long words and an average sentence length of 18. So if you were to reverse the order of the sentences in the tadpole piece, you'd get exactly the same score as before. **In other words, if writing is muddled, ambiguous, or misleading, the test score won't tell you.**

The formulas can act as a rough yardstick. Say a firm does consultancy work for its customers and writes reports for them. It can decide that the reports must score below a certain level on the formula or they won't be published without further editing. The yardstick acts as a constant reminder to authors. They can then be encouraged to attend courses and learn about clear writing.

A yardstick can be used to beat people, though. So if an agency sets a target that 'all our documents must score reading age 13 (US school grade 8) on Flesch–Kincaid', authors need some leeway if there are good reasons why such a score is impossible. For example, a leaflet may have to use polysyllabic words like *benefit*, *eligible*, *universal*, *adaptation*, or *disabled*. A report on Islamic finance may have to use terms like *ijara* and *diminishing musharaka*. Medical leaflets may need to equip patients with terms like *endometriosis* and *vasovagal syncope*. These will unavoidably raise the Flesch score.

Rudolf Flesch, who developed readability formulas, said they should not be worshipped:

Some readers, I am afraid, will expect a magic formula for good writing and will be disappointed with my simple yardstick. Others, with a passion for accuracy, will wallow in the little rules and computations but lose sight of the principles of plain English. What I hope for are readers who won't take the formula too seriously and won't expect from it more than a rough estimate.

The Flesch–Kincaid grade level of this chapter (excluding extracts and tables) is about 9.7 (UK reading age 14.7) and its Flesch Reading Ease score is about 59.

# 20

## Writing sound starts and excellent endings

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**GUIDELINE** *In emails and letters, avoid fusty first sentences and clichéd finishes.*

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In emails and letters, the best place to start being clear is at the beginning. Your first sentence should be easy to read, complete, concise, and in modern English. This is easily done if you avoid three common traps.

Trap 1: Writing an unfinished sentence

All these first sentences are incomplete:

Further to your letter of 3 February concerning the trustees of the P F Smith Settlement.

Regarding your claim for benefit.

With reference to our previous correspondence notifying you of the transfer of the administration of the above policy to Aviva with effect from 9 January.

In response to your letter to Mr Jones dated 19 February.

Each of them needs to be continued and completed, using a comma instead of a full stop. For example:

Further to your letter of 3 February concerning the trustees of the P F Smith Settlement, I'm pleased to enclose the form you requested.

Regarding your claim for benefit, I need some more information.

Or you could insert a main verb at the start to complete the sentences:

Thank you for your letter of 3 February concerning the trustees of the P F Smith Settlement.

I refer to your claim for benefit.

Other verbs that will do a similar job include *I acknowledge*, *I confirm*, and *I write to explain*. These are preferable for another reason: they use personal words like *I*, *you*, and *we*.

Don't be afraid to write a one-sentence paragraph at the start of a letter:

Thank you for your letter of 13 May.

If you're taking the initiative—rather than responding to an enquiry—these phrases may help start your first sentence well:

You are warmly invited to ... You may be interested in ...

This is an opportunity to ... Now is a good time to consider ...

Or you could ask a question—preferably one to which the reader will answer *yes*:

Does your office have old and outdated law books gathering dust in corners? Would you like to create some extra space for yourself, and see those books go to a good cause at the same time? If so ...

## Trap 2: Repeating the heading

Most letters and emails benefit from a heading, as it introduces the topic and saves having to write a long first sentence to cover the same ground. The heading might even run to several lines:

Lease Agreement No. 727-252-8978

Goods: Touchline Telephone System

Installation address: Piller House, Crook Street, Downtown DWS 9JK

Whether the heading is short or long, don't keep referring to it with such phrases as *with reference to the above-mentioned equipment*,



*regarding the above-numbered agreement, the above matter, and in connection with the aforementioned.* Let's say you're selling a house and someone has phoned for details. Instead of writing:

Dear Ms Widdicombe

The Tree House, 67 Larch Avenue, Poplar

I refer to your enquiry yesterday in relation to the above-mentioned property, and enclose details as requested.

—it is crisper to write:

Dear Ms Widdicombe

The Tree House, 67 Larch Avenue, Poplar

I refer to your enquiry yesterday and enclose details of the property as requested.

—or

Thanks for your enquiry yesterday about this property; the details are enclosed.

—or

Thank you for your enquiry. I'm pleased to enclose details of this spacious and well-situated house.

That last suggestion benefits from immediately mentioning some of the selling points.

Trap 3: Archaic language

Avoid fusty language like:

Our recent telephone discussion refers.

Modern readers find *refers* very odd in this position because it ends the sentence with such a jolt. Use *I refer to...* or *In our recent telephone conversation, we discussed...* In an internal email you could merely say *We spoke about this*, when the heading will provide enough context for what you spoke about.

Just as fusty is:

Re your letter of the 10th, the contents of which have been noted.

*Re* is Latin for *in the matter of* and is best avoided. When you are responding to someone's letter, it is stating the obvious to say you have *noted the contents*. And anyway, the phrase sounds bureaucratic and disapproving, so avoid it. Similarly, avoid the old-fashioned *instant*, *ultimo*, and *proximo*, which some writers still use to mean *this month*, *last month*, and *next month* respectively, as in 'Thank you for your letter of the 15th *instant*'. This immediately marks you out as a dinosaur.

Finishing well

Keep the finish simple and sincere. In a sales letter you could reiterate an important action point:

I look forward to receiving your order soon. Then you can begin to benefit from the new system.

You could even add a PS beneath the signature. Useful non-selling sign-offs include *I hope this is helpful* (which is better than the negative *I am sorry I cannot be more helpful*); and *If you need more information, please contact me*—which is better than waffle like *Should you require any further assistance or clarification from ourselves with regard to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact the writer undersigned*.

If you are trying to close a correspondence with a difficult customer, you could try:

I hope you'll understand our position, and I regret we can't help any further.

If a complainant won't take no for an answer and you have nothing more to say, ever, you could try:

Unless you provide new information, I regret we won't respond to further correspondence on this matter.

These are only suggestions. Write what suits your circumstances and personality. Try to make it sound individually crafted.

## Conventions on opening and closing

If you start with *Dear [first name]*, *Dear [Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms]*, or *Dear [first name and surname]*, the conventional endings are *Yours sincerely*, *Sincerely yours*, or *Yours truly*. Or use a sensible sign-off of your own making: *Kind regards* and *Best wishes* are common among people well known to each other. *Regards*, *Best*, and *Kind regards* are common in informal and semi-formal emails.

If you begin *Dear Sir* or *Dear Madam*, the traditional formal ending is *Yours faithfully* or, in the US, *Yours truly*. An alternative start is to use the organization's name: *Dear Express Bus Company*.

In the UK, the *Dear...* salutation is followed by a comma or nothing. Whichever is used, the pattern is repeated after the *Yours...* closure. In the US, the salutation is usually followed by a colon (formal) or comma (informal) and the closure by a comma.

Esquires were originally the shield-bearers of knights, or men in royal or noble service. Once a favoured courtesy title after a man's name, *Esq.* is now rarely seen in the address block of a letter. It is perhaps thought over-formal or servile. The title is not applied to a woman's name except, oddly, among US lawyers, where both sexes use it when writing to each other. Nor does it traditionally follow *Mr*, so *Mr J Smith Esq.* is unusual.

Punctuation can be omitted from the address block in British English (though it's still common in the US), so this is now normal style:

Mr J H Author  
34 Ivory Towers  
Watership Down WD2 0NN

In the UK, with its complex honours system and welter of titles for royalty, the nobility, the peerage, and religious office holders, the usually simple jobs of greeting a correspondent, closing a letter, and addressing an envelope can be troublesome. You'll find all the conventions—and as much feudal wisdom as you can stomach—in *Titles and Forms of Address* (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *Debrett's Correct Form* (Debrett's, 2015). Similar advice is available online.

# 21

## Creating better emails

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**GUIDELINE** *Take as much care with emails as you would with the rest of your writing.*

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Most of the other guidelines are relevant to emails but this chapter offers some further points that are specific to them.

Like a paper-based message, an email may be many things: a note to a colleague, a business letter to an external customer or partner, a response to a complaint, or a call for information. It may also become part of a chain formed by several emails from different authors.

The main benefits of emails are speed and ease of use. They also enable you to include clickable links; attach documents, photos, etc. as digital files; and insert your own comments at various points in an inbound email, and then return it as your reply or forward it to others.

Possible drawbacks include:

- responding too hastily or angrily because a reply is so easy to send
- copying your email to the wrong people, such as a business rival or an opponent in a legal action
- sending libellous or indiscreet material that others may forward or post on social media
- sending messages that break data-protection or obscenity laws
- cc'ing your message to people who will have little or no interest in it
- misjudging the level of formality required and being too friendly or too distant
- proofreading only on screen and thus missing errors you'd normally notice in a printout, and

- attaching long documents to your message, just because you can, when these will be irrelevant to most readers.

You need to consider these drawbacks with a cool head before pressing ‘send’. If in doubt, wait.

## Planning and structure

We all tend to type first and think later. Yet it remains a good idea to plan an email briefly at the outset if you’ve more than, say, six points to make. Planning helps you collect your thoughts, decide what you really want to say, and use one of the structures in chapter 2 to organize the points. Your most usual structure will be the top-heavy triangle because you’ll want your main points to be in the immediately visible part of the reader’s screen, answering their inevitable questions:

- What’s this about?
- What’s it got to do with me?
- What do you want me to do about it?

For a lengthy email you could use headings or reduce the length by adding an attachment that has its own system of headings.

At the least, your plan can be a typed list of points on your computer’s notepad—put them in no particular order at first; you can organize them later. Or your plan can be a bubble diagram on paper, as shown in chapter 1.

By all means write a quick first draft based on your plan, but hold it as a draft for a while. Then read it as if you’ve never seen it before, and rework it. This will help you smooth out rough edges that may confuse or offend, and remove errors and ambiguities.

## Standards to follow

A clear heading in the subject line is a good start. To be predictive is more important than to be brief—in other words, you should specify what the email is about. So not *Proposed meeting* but *Proposed meeting with Gemma Bennett, Gem Design, 22 May, 5pm*. If you’re replying to an email, it’s courteous to keep to the original heading unless it’s

obviously wrong or unspecific or puts words into your mouth with which you disagree. If the email requires an urgent response or is just for information, signal this in the heading. If your email program automatically inserts *Re* as the first word of the heading, strike a small blow for conciseness by deleting it.

Use a greeting and sign-off. For a formal email that is effectively an external letter, follow letter conventions (chapter 20). So write *Dear Dr Adamson* and *Yours sincerely* and end with your name, job title, phone number, etc. (use the automated signature option available in most email programs). Although your email might not appear on your business stationery, it could be printed out by the recipient and circulated as a business letter. Or you could prepare a letter on your company's electronic letterhead, then attach it to a short covering email.

For a semi-formal email where you know the person or have corresponded with them, use the style *Dear John* or *John* and *Kind regards* or *Best wishes*. For an informal email, you can please yourself, but *Hi John* and a bare *Hello* are much used, with *Regards* as a fairly standard form of sign-off.

Vary all these possibilities to suit your taste and to comply with your in-house rules. Take care to type the salutation correctly. Having complained to an airport about lost baggage, I received an email headed *Without Prejudice* (a lawyer's way of trying to say the email couldn't be used in legal proceedings), which then began *Dear Mr prejudice*.

Though you may have available a wide range of fonts, colours, backgrounds, and symbols, be sparing with them unless they will genuinely help fulfil your purpose. Some receiving devices may not be able to display all your carefully crafted special effects.

### Formality in the text

Email is a more informal medium than a paper letter. As we've seen, you need to judge the right degree of formality in the greeting and sign-off, and make similar adjustments in the body of the email. If in doubt, err on the side of formality. Sometimes you'll want to keep a

degree of distance from a customer who is seeking to draw you into a more informal business relationship than you want. Be aware that others may be reading over the immediate recipient's shoulder. As email is not a secure medium, consider how your message might look on the front page of the *Daily Mail*. If you're a lawyer, consider how it will sound when read in open court.

### Checking carefully

In a note to busy colleagues, occasional spelling mistakes and the like will not cause much dismay as they all make mistakes themselves. But be careful not to be so slipshod that you give the impression you don't care enough about your readers or the topic to express yourself well. And some details do matter—the timing of a meeting, the date of a training course, an amount of money, a missing *not*. Proofread carefully and slowly—you're not skim-reading for information, but checking for errors (see chapter 12).

This email from a British social worker calls for various actions, but the error-strewn style looks slapdash and unprofessional:

were anxious to expedite this matter and would be grateful to information requested and costings as soon as possible otherwise we will have to source other placements in addition K is currently placed at Shaw house were it is agreed his needs are not being met however the delay in providing the info and costing has necessitated K remaining her we would expect you to review the current fee structure at this placement since the delay in moving K i.e reducing them

After receiving a reply, the social worker wrote again. Now it was closer to English, but showed that her first effort was no fluke:

Many Thanks For your information I am now in demand of a move date as K needs to be moved as a matter of Urgency now due to his needs not being met at his current placement

So check even your briefest emails before sending them. And be as punctilious with long emails as you would with paper-based documents. If it's important enough, print out your email, polish it on paper, then transfer the amendments to the screen.

Always check the addresses. Copying to the wrong person can be disastrous, as a hotel wedding planner found when emailing her manager but unwittingly cc'ing the bride. The next time she saw it was under big headlines in several national newspapers:

I need your advice on this wedding. I know this probably doesn't sound very nice, but I am trying to put this wedding off as I don't think they are the type of people that we would want to have at Stoke Park. I spoke to the bride yesterday as she was enquiring about availability, and I have put her off for now by telling her the dates that she is looking at are not available, but she has asked me if I can get back to her with available dates around end of June beginning of July 2013.

The hotel offered apologies, but should not have been surprised when the couple chose to book their big day elsewhere.

### Abbreviations, emojis, and emoticons

Abbreviations are common in informal emails. Obvious ones include *asap* (as soon as possible), *wd* (would), *u* (you), *pls* (please), *thnx* (thanks), *faq* (frequently asked question), *btw* (by the way), *fya* (for your amusement), *fyi* (for your information), *fwiw* (for what it's worth), *oic* (oh, I see), *rec'd* (received), and *yr* (your). In semi-formal or formal emails, it's better to avoid using them because some may not be understood and others will seem too casual. In 2012 the male British prime minister was the butt of some tittering for ending texts to a female journalist friend with *LOL*, which he took to mean 'lots of love'. People who thought they knew better insisted it could only mean 'laugh out loud'.

Emojis (visual images usually expressing emotions—dictionaries of them are available online) and emoticons/smiley faces (formed from textual characters and punctuation marks) have become popular. My perhaps old-fashioned view is to avoid them in all but the most personal emails. There are some valuable uses, though, as this teacher explains:

As an English-medium science teacher working in a remote Emirati school in Abu Dhabi, I use emojis daily to communicate with parents who speak little or no English. Praising work and behaviour with smiley faces, clapping hands, trophies and medals always provides replies of hearts and flowers. Attention and respect given and received. Emojis cross language, age and culture. [Letter, *The Times*, 15 April 2019]



# 22

## Using inclusive language

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**GUIDELINE** *Use inclusive language when it's accurate and feasible.*

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Although language that excludes or antagonizes people because of their sex, sexuality, or disability is not strictly a matter of clarity, anything that raises a barrier between you and your readers may reduce the impact of your message. So inclusive language is better language, and it's also required by many organizations to avoid prejudice and unfair discrimination. Take particular care with emails and social-media posts where hasty, inept, or unjustifiable language can be career-threatening and raise the hackles of sensitive readers.

### Neutral language

The fashion retailer Boden surprised some customers when its 2019 catalogue promoted a range of boys' clothes with the words *Boys, start every adventure with a bike (or a pair of very fast legs), fellow mischief-makers, [and] clothes that can keep up.*—but a range of girls' clothes with much fluffier language: *Girls, new clothes are in sight. Fill your pockets (and wardrobe) with flowers and race this way.* Boden apologized for its stereotypical writing and promised to do better.

The BIC company provoked similar ridicule by promoting a range of pens 'just for her', these being 'designed to fit comfortably in a woman's hand' in an 'attractive barrel design available in pink and purple'. A reviewer on Amazon, 'book-fiend', wrote:

Before these pens, I was nothing. I was a mere inconsequential woman, stumbling around writing nonsense with big pens that made me look ridiculous. I could barely write my name without having to sit down afterwards.

But neither Boden nor BIC could compete for rank offensiveness with a *Scottish Sun* interviewer who drooled over the acclaimed violinist Nicola Benedetti in an article in 2012. He wondered why the ‘sexy Scot doesn’t make more of her fabulous figure’ and:

doesn’t always take the bonniest photo—she’s beaky in pics sometimes, which is weird because in the flesh she’s an absolute knock-out. The classical musician is wearing skinny jeans which show off her long legs. She’s also busty with a washboard flat tummy, tottering around 5ft 10in in her Dune platform wedges.

He ended by urging Benedetti’s boyfriend, a cellist, to ‘get busy making sweet, sweet music’ that would make her pregnant soon. Yes, this really was printed in a widely circulated paid-for daily paper that employed subeditors.

Sometimes, though, the sensitivity to supposed sexism can look unbalanced and overdone. In 2017 a paediatric surgeon copied parents in on a letter to their child’s GP that said:

Unfortunately her mum could not be at the clinic today as she has not been well and father stepped in manfully.

The mother shared it on social media and then with the national press, complaining in outraged tones that *manfully* (i.e. bravely or resolutely) was so sexist it had distressed her. The relevant health trust took the easy way out and apologized.

**Using neutral terms** This means avoiding words suggesting that maleness is the norm or superior or positive and that femaleness is nonstandard, subordinate, or negative. Terms like *businessmen*, *firemen*, *headmaster*, and *sculptress* can be replaced by less restrictive words: *business people* (or *executives*), *firefighters*, *headteacher*, and *sculptor*. It’s almost unthinkable today for Sylvia Plath to be called a *poetess*, as she was in *The Times* in 1960. Some terms may survive this trend, such as *actress*—which perhaps lacks the negative echoes of low status and low pay—though some female actors specifically refer to themselves as *actors*. *Fisher people* and *fisherfolk* seem unlikely to gain popular acceptance as alternatives to *fishermen* on the open sea, but *anglers* is a convenient neutral term for those who fish for sport. The

term *purseress*, which was used in a BBC broadcast of 1968 about the first voyage of a cross-Channel hovercraft, seems laughable today, when *purser* would be the obvious neutral term. The *Daily Mail* used *seductress* in 2008, presumably as a more seductive alternative to the neutral *seducer*. In air travel, the neutral *flight attendant* seems to be gradually superseding *steward* and *stewardess*. *Statespersonlike* is sometimes written and heard, but its obvious absurdity suggests that *statesmanlike* will continue to be the word of choice.

There seem not to be any usable alternatives for such terms as *one-upmanship*, *craftsmanship*, and *man-made climate change*. An all-female discussion on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* about protests in South Sudan in 2019 spoke of local women 'manning the barricades'. No other word will do that job. It's obvious that women can *man* or *master* things, so these are often neutral words. *Manned space flight*, though, is losing ground to *human space flight*.

Since 2007, UK parliamentary drafters have tried to write neutrally worded laws, overturning the custom that male pronouns stand for either sex. Their *Drafting Guidance* (free download from the Web) gives four pages on techniques. Announcing the change, the leader of the Commons said the guidance would apply so long as it meant 'no more than a reasonable cost to brevity or intelligibility'.

Gendered words	Neutral words
authoress	author
chairman, chairwoman	chair
clergymen	clergy, clerics, priests
comedienne	comedian, comic
craftsmen	craft workers, artisans
foreman	supervisor, head juror (law)
heroine	hero
layman	layperson

Gendered words	Neutral words
man (as mankind)	human beings, people, humans, humanity
man (noun)	person, individual, you
man (verb)	operate, staff, run, work
manageress	manager
man-hours	working hours
policeman, policewoman	police officer
salesman, salesgirl	sales agent/representative/ rep/consultant
workman	worker

**Using titles or ‘he or she’ or the plural** It’s better to avoid *he*, *his*, or *him* when you intend to include both men and women. Instead of:

Solvent abuse is not a crime but if a police officer finds a young person under 17 sniffing solvents, he should take him to a secure place such as a police station, home, or hospital.

—you could repeat the short titles of both people:

Solvent abuse is not a crime but if a police officer finds a young person under 17 sniffing solvents, **the officer** should take **the person** to a secure place such as home, a police station, or a hospital.

Using *he or she* and *him or her* is also feasible here—perhaps, to avoid confusion, for just one of the people:

Solvent abuse is not a crime but if a police officer finds a person under 17 sniffing solvents, **he or she** should take the person to a secure place such as home, a police station, or a hospital.

In guidance to police officers, it would be feasible to use *you* and the plural:

Solvent abuse is not a crime but if **you** find a person under 17 sniffing solvents, **you** should take **them** to a secure place such as **their** home, a police station, or a hospital.

Using the plural also helps disentangle a muddle like this:

If the court grants immediate possession, the tenant and anyone else living with him or her is required to leave his, her or their home immediately. If he, she or they do not do so, the court bailiffs will evict him, her or them.

It could become:

If the court grants immediate possession, the tenant and anyone living with them must leave their home immediately. If they do not do so, the court bailiff will evict them.

It has become more acceptable to flout the grammatical conventions set in the eighteenth century by male grammarians, and to do what Shakespeare did when he wrote:

God send everyone their heart's desire.

—in other words, to revive the old use of *they*, *them*, and *their* as singulars, as in these examples from forms and standard letters:

- 1 Your child has been chosen to take part in a class to further support and consolidate **their** creative writing skills.
- 2 You may find that an individual has levels of competence in several skills beyond those required in **their** current role.

'Everybody' and 'everyone' are clearly singular in appearance but they are plural in effect, and for centuries have sometimes been followed by a plural pronoun in speech and writing, which avoids the need for *his/her*:

Everybody seems to recover their spirits. (John Ruskin, 1866)

Everyone was absorbed in their own businesses. (Andrew Motion, poet laureate 1999–2009, in 1989)

Using the plural as a singular still annoys some diehards, and its alleged inconsistency can be avoided with careful editing—though often at

the cost of clumsiness. Equally, however, it can be clear and good English that is easy to read and speak aloud.

### Disability language

For many years, it's been frowned on to use *handicap* and *handicapped* (as regards people) in the UK, though these terms are widespread in India and their translated equivalents are common in several European languages. The accepted terms in the UK are *disability* and *disabled*, as in *people with disabilities* and *disabled people*. (Using *people* in this way is preferable to, e.g., *the deaf*, *the disabled*, *the blind*.) Terms like *cripple*/*crippled* and *invalid* are out of favour as demeaning. *Differently abled* has not yet caught on. It's preferable to write *X uses a wheelchair* than *X is wheelchair-bound* as it implies more control.

*Deaf* implies very hard of hearing or totally deaf. *Hearing-impaired* implies a level of deafness that may be helped by hearing aids. Some people wish to give a capital D to *Deaf* to signify membership of a deaf community but this is a political stance that has gained little ground.

*A person with Down's syndrome* is referred to as such or, e.g., *Amy has Down's*.

With autism or Asperger's syndrome, the many permutations include *John is on the autistic spectrum*; *Ella has Asperger's*. *Autistic people* are referred to as such and not as *autistics*.

*Blind* implies someone who is registered blind or almost completely blind. *Partially sighted* and *visually impaired* imply moderate to severe sight loss.

If writing about other disabilities, it's best to check preferred terms with representative bodies.

### Language of ethnicity and skin colour

On the rare occasions when UK authors need to refer to people's origins or skin colour—say when devising an ethnic-monitoring questionnaire—they'll want to use the eighteen standard terms for ethnic (social/cultural) background available on the Office for National Statistics website, including *Mixed*, e.g. White and Black African;

*Asian/Asian British*, e.g. Indian, Chinese; and *White*, e.g. English/Welsh/Scottish, Gypsy, or Irish Traveller. These terms are largely meaningless expressions of feeling and opinion, and no one is obliged to complete ethnic-monitoring forms correctly or at all. However, as some ethnicities are prone to certain medical conditions—like sickle-cell anaemia in West African heritage—it's important for health forms to ask the right questions and for medics to do the right tests.

If you're writing about non-white people as a group, then *BME* or *BAME* (black and minority ethnic/black, Asian, and minority ethnic) are often used but are hard to define. The terms include such disparate ethnic groups as people from India and Somalia. UK citizens are simply *British*, whatever their origins and skin colour. If ethnic background is relevant, then such terms as *British Pakistani* and *British Indian* are clear and respectful. Also feasible are such formulations as *UK citizens of Turkish [etc.] heritage*.

Some terms that include *black* have pejorative connotations, e.g. *accident blackspot*, *blackmail*, *blacken X's character*, *black-hearted*, *blackleg*, *black economy*, *black sheep of the family*, *blacklist*. These are linguistic accidents that have nothing to do with skin colour. Sometimes people may take offence at their use, however.

Barack Obama (the former US president) and the Duchess of Sussex (Meghan Markle) both have a white and a black parent. Obama is usually described as black and Markle as mixed-race or biracial, though the reason for the difference is unclear—perhaps their own personal or political preference. When 'race' is discussed, people usually mean ethnic background, because the planet is home to only one human race or species. The scientific evidence is now clear—all humans belong to the same species, *homo sapiens*, which originated in Africa. In China and other parts of South East Asia, many have been taught they descend from a different species, *homo erectus*. This was finally disproved by Chinese scientists who studied DNA evidence for the BBC series *The Incredible Human Journey* in 2009, and by the mapping of the human genome at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Evolution has produced variations in skin colour, which, along with sexuality, remains one of the duller things about most people—but is endlessly discussed as part of identity politics.

In the UK, *black* and *brown* are commonly used to describe shades of skin colour. In the US, *African American* may gradually replace *black*. Increasingly, the US terms *person of colour*, *man of colour*, and *woman of colour* are seen and heard in the UK. However, the similar *coloured person*, once a term of respect, is regarded as derogatory. In South Africa, *coloured* is a respectful term for people of mixed ethnicity.

### LGBT, etc. on business forms

If writing about lesbian, gay, bisexual (*bi*) and transgender (*trans*) people (LGBT), those are the most generally acceptable terms to use. Business and government forms can easily be changed to reflect the family set-ups of LGBT households. They can ask for the names of *partner 1* and *partner 2*, for example, or of *you* and *your partner*. In the same way, a school form can ask for the names of *parent/carer 1* and *parent/carer 2* instead of *mother's name* and *father's name*. These changes should be uncontroversial in the UK, where same-sex civil partnerships are lawful (same-sex marriage is also lawful except in Northern Ireland).

Since 2019, HSBC bank has allowed existing and potential customers who don't regard themselves as men or women to choose from a list of ten neutral titles. These include *Mx* (pronounced *mix* or *mux*), *Ind* (individual), *Misc* (miscellaneous), *Mre* (mystery), *Pr* (person), and *Msr* (combining Miss and Sir). Some of these seem contrived, so it will be interesting to see how far people choose them. *Mx* seems to be the runaway favourite.

Facebook offers its users more than seventy gender options, including *polygender* (several genders at the same or different times), *cisgender* (meaning that gender identity corresponds with apparent sex at birth), *agender* (does not identify as any gender), *pangender* (identifies with more than one gender or with all genders), *genderqueer* (non-binary,



or not identifying as male or female—but this is not related to sexual preference), *intersex* (sex characteristics don't fit typical binary notions of male and female bodies), and *two-spirit person* (a particular kind of indigenous Native American). The many options are rich in new vocabulary.

### Transgender language

*Transgender* means a person's mind says they are one gender but this differs from the biological sex they were born into (or *assigned at birth*, the phrase often used by transgender people). They may or may not have transitioned from one gender to another through gender-reassignment surgery or hormone treatment.

In a campaign about cervical cancer in 2018, Cancer Research UK sought to be more trans-inclusive by avoiding the word *woman*, encouraging 'everyone aged 25–64 with a cervix' to take a smear test. Omitting all references to women was deliberate, the charity said, so as not to exclude biological females who identified as men. However, this raised questions about clarity because, as a GP practice nurse told *The Times*, 'The problem is a lot of women don't even know about their cervix. They may think they don't have one, reading this, and not bother.' Another charity, Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, said its own preferred wording was 'women and anyone [else] with a cervix'.

This story reflects fraught battles in language politics, with some feminists arguing that sex is biological and unchangeable and that gender is socially constructed (i.e. not set by biology). They may cite the genetic evidence that males almost always have one X and one Y chromosome and that females almost always have XX, which they may regard as support for the view that biological males cannot become biological females and vice versa. Ranged against this position are many trans-rights campaigners and others who say that biological sex is a label assigned at birth which, like gender identity, can be changed. Currently in the UK (2019), over-18s who wish to change gender legally must have lived for two years in their preferred gender, and get a doctor's diagnosis of gender dysphoria and a gender

recognition certificate. Since 2016, trans people have been able to change the sex stated on their UK passport and driving licence without providing medical evidence.

The public display of a dictionary definition of *woman* as *noun*—*adult human female* became controversial in 2018, when a feminist paid to put it on a giant billboard near a political conference at Liverpool. She was seeking to dissuade the government from expanding the legal definition of a woman to include biological males who declare themselves female, which she believed would enable predatory men to invade women's changing rooms, toilets, refuges, and rape-crisis centres. After a complaint that the poster was 'hate speech', the billboard company removed it.

In these struggles, even toilet doors have been on the front line. A notice on one in a London theatre states:

We aim to be a trans and non-binary inclusive space and as such we encourage patrons to please use the facilities that best fit their gender identity or expression. Gender-neutral toilets are also available.

At the Barbican theatre in London, the former men's toilets are labelled *Gender Neutral with Urinals*, the former women's *Gender Neutral with Cubicles*. Such wordings are not yet widespread.

In 2017, the Wellcome museum of medical artefacts in London used the term *womxn* in its marketing for a series of events highlighting 'the ways womxn are included, excluded, catalogued and classified'. Its website linked to an online dictionary that said *womxn* was more inclusive of trans women. After adverse online comment, including a request for men to be called *mxn*, the website removed all references to *womxn* and apologized for making 'the wrong call'.

Guidelines from the British Medical Association to its 160,000 members (2017) say pregnant women should not be called *expectant mothers* for fear of offending intersex and trans people:

A large majority of people that have been pregnant or have given birth identify as women. We can include intersex men and transmen who may get pregnant by saying 'pregnant people' instead of 'expectant mothers'.

From September 2020 state primary schools in England must cover ‘relationship education’, including some lessons about LGBT family set-ups. Arbury primary school in Cambridge has become well known as an ‘early adopter’ for classroom discussion about LGBT issues. Its website includes well-written and brightly designed handouts for children and parents on gender equality, and offers a link to Lucy Rae’s clear and engaging Stonewall booklet *Getting started*, which explains how teachers should discuss various family set-ups with children and the legal basis for doing so. The site also includes the leaflet *How to be trans friendly* (downloadable, 2019), which warns against ‘misgendering’:

Calling someone ‘he/she’ or ‘it’ or deliberately the wrong pronoun is unkind, and illegal. If you hear or see this kind of language being used, report it.

Clear though the leaflet is, misgendering is not in fact a criminal offence as it suggests.

For parents of children who are confused about their gender and sexuality, the NHS provides a clear and coherent webpage at <<http://www.gids.nhs.uk>>.

# 23

## Using alternatives to words alone

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**GUIDELINE** *Consider different ways of setting out your information.*

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Using only the written word isn't always best. Other possibilities include tables, illustrations, pie charts, diagrams, maps, strip cartoons, video clips, mathematical formulas, and photos. The difficulty is knowing when to use them. Which ones will suit the information? There's no rulebook, so you have to think flexibly and experiment a bit to see what might work. Ideally, you should test your ideas with typical readers.

### Tables

An insurance company wants to tell a customer how much her policies are worth, so it uses continuous text:

You now hold three equity plans. The 2014 plan is mature and is valued at £1862.08. The 2015 plan will not become mature until 1 January 2024 and is currently valued at £1950.43. The 2017 plan will mature on 1 January 2026 and is currently valued at £1738.45.

These sentences are short and simple enough for any investor who knows that 'mature' means the policy is ready for cashing in. But you

can see that the point about the 2015 plan is written in the negative, whereas that about the 2017 plan uses the positive despite making similar points. All the sentences should be consistently positive. Using elaborate alternatives to text would be unjustifiable for such simple ideas. But a table would be feasible because each sentence gives a year, a value, and a maturity date. Creating a table is easy in most word-processing packages, and might look like one of these:

**You now hold three equity plans, as follows:**

Year of plan	Current value	Maturity date
2014	£1862.08	Already mature
2015	£1950.43	1 January 2024
2017	£1738.45	1 January 2026

**You now hold three equity plans, as follows:**

	2014 plan	2015 plan	2017 plan
Current value	£1862.08	£1950.43	£1738.45
Maturity date	Already mature	1 Jan 2024	1 Jan 2026

Of all the options, I prefer the first of the two tables, as it seems easier to compare the values and maturity dates in vertical columns than in continuous text or rows. This version could be extended easily if, say, details of ten plans were being given. In continuous text this would be tedious, while you'd need a spreadsheet to accommodate ten plans in the style of the second table.

Other possibilities with text and tables

The more complex the information, the more the possible choices of presentation multiply, and there's rarely one perfect solution. To show

this, here are five ways of presenting the same handful of facts about what a local council will charge for hiring out a hall.

**Version 1:** *Continuous text—original version*

This version is the real one that was used. Though far from gobbledygook, it doesn't seem clear at first reading:

Hiring fees of £100.00 or less must be paid in full at the time of booking. In the case of all hiring fees in excess of £100.00 the hirer agrees to pay £100.00 deposit at once on all bookings valued up to £200.00 or 50 per cent of the total hire fee as a deposit on bookings on or over £200.00 in value. The balance of the cost of each hiring must be paid at least 21 days before the date of the event.

I asked several writers to offer alternatives. Shown below are their four suggestions. In some, the tone of voice has changed with the use of *please* instead of *must*. (In a contract, *must* would be necessary.) Otherwise, the content is the same, though you'll see that amounts from £100.01–100.99 and £199.01–£199.99 aren't covered in version 1 or the alternatives. Which do you think is best?

**Version 2:** *Continuous text—paragraphed version*

This version paragraphs the information:

If a hiring fee is £100 or less, please pay it in full when you book.  
 If the hiring fee is from £101 to £199, please pay £100 deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event.  
 If the hiring fee is £200 or over, please pay half the hiring fee as a deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event.

As the sentence patterns are similar (all starting with *if* statements), readers can easily pick out the details relevant to them.

**Version 3:** *Vertical list*

Version 3 converts version 2 into a vertical list:

**If the hiring fee is:**

- £100 or less, please pay it in full when you book
- £101 to £199, please pay £100 deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event
- £200 or over, please pay half the hiring fee as a deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event.

**Version 4:** *Questions and answers*

A question-and-answer set-up is feasible:

**Is the hiring fee £100 or less?**  
Please pay it in full when you book.

**Is the hiring fee £101 to £199?**  
Please pay £100 deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event.

**Is the hiring fee £200 or over?**  
Please pay half the hiring fee as a deposit when you book, then pay the rest at least 21 days before the event.

**Version 5:** *Table*

The final option is a table:

Hiring fee	Deposit	Balance to be paid
£100 or less	None—pay fee in full on booking	
£101 to £199	£100 deposit, pay on booking	At least 21 days before event
£200 or over	Half hiring fee, pay on booking	At least 21 days before event

### *The focus group's verdict*

The focus group narrowly preferred version 4, giving it an average of 18 points out of 20 for clarity. The differences were small, though: version 5 scored 17; version 3 scored 16; and version 2 scored 15. On first preferences, version 5 was the clear leader: 11 people out of 35 preferred it, while 8 preferred version 4. Version 1 was a distant fifth, scoring 6/20 for clarity and receiving no first preferences.

These results suggest the focus group preferred plain English in whatever layout it appeared, but they regarded layout as important in their ultimate preference. In practice, the best presentation would depend on the document's purpose and the readers' purpose. A question-and-answer layout might be seen as friendlier than a table, but friendliness would be more relevant in a sales leaflet than a legal contract. Readers wanting to get the answers to specific questions might perform better with a table, while those wanting to remember what they had read might perform better with questions and answers.

There are no easy solutions: writers need to know what presentation methods are feasible, choose options that might work, and try to pretest to discover readers' reactions to them.

### Decision trees

An algorithm may work well if the information aims to help people make a decision from a wide range of possibilities or explain a complicated procedure. Decision trees tend to occupy more space than text and may take longer to design, but they can save readers a lot of effort. *Example:* A charity wanted to collect donations tax-effectively and issued a leaflet explaining several methods: Gift Aid, Deed of Covenant, Payroll Giving, and Deposited Covenant. It summarized them like this:



If you pay UK income tax and:

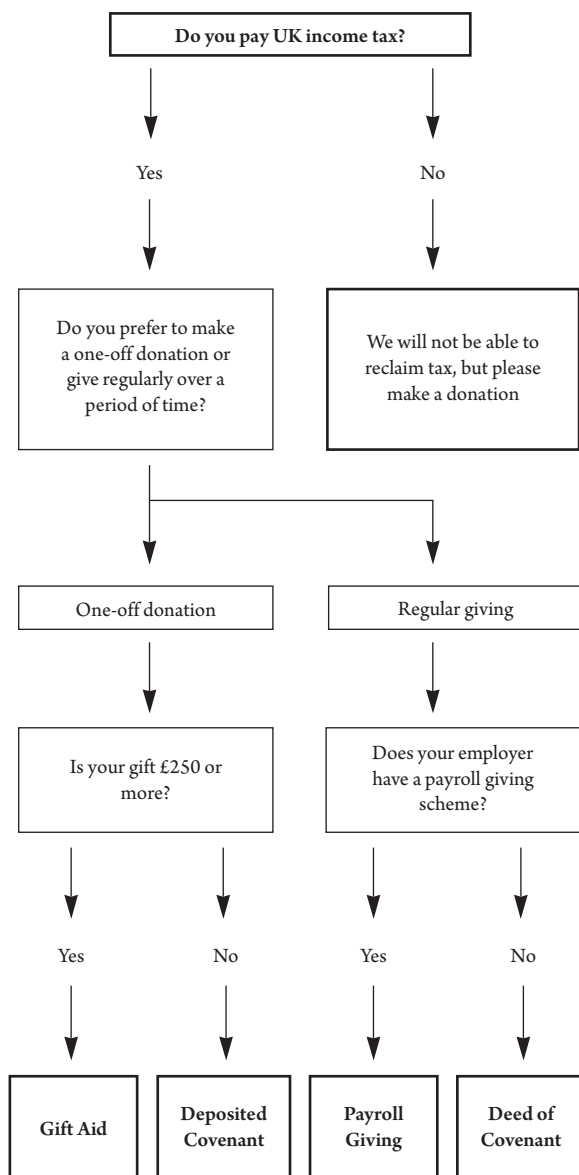
- you want to make a one-off donation of £250 or more, please use Gift Aid
- or • you want to make a one-off donation of less than £250, please use a Deposited Covenant
- or • you want to give regularly and your employer has a payroll giving scheme, please use the scheme
- or • you want to give regularly and your employer does not have a payroll giving scheme, please use a Deed of Covenant.

If you do not pay UK income tax, we will not be able to reclaim tax on your donation but please make a donation anyway.

This is fairly complex, but set out in a decision tree (as shown on page 211), it looks less daunting and the choices are more obvious. Whether typical readers would agree could only be discovered by testing it with them.

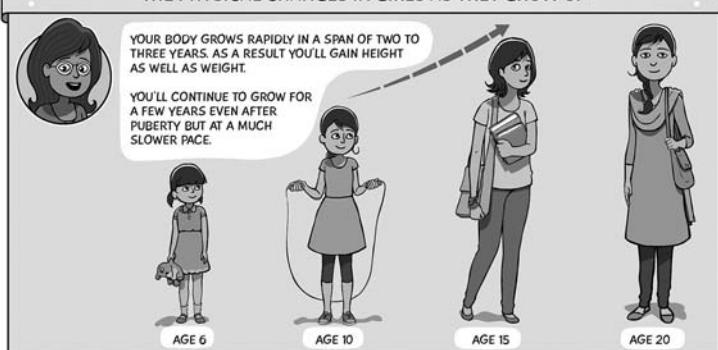
### Strip cartoons

Comic books and strip cartoons are popular worldwide, especially with children and less-literate adults. So they can powerfully channel information about sensitive and taboo topics, combining simple storylines with appealing graphics to attract even hard-to-reach audiences. In India, the 100-page Menstrupedia comic provides a strong example. Its high-quality, colourful, explicit illustrations and simple, age-appropriate text (available in many languages) inform girls of 9–14 about menstruation and puberty. The comic's website says that the 'friendly guide to healthy periods' is used in India by 6,000 schools and 250,000 girls, as well as in seventeen other countries. Aditi Gupta, Menstrupedia co-founder, told the BBC website (March 2019): 'Why a comic book works is that it does not look like a dirty book on a dirty topic. Comic is not a threatening medium.' To show the style, page 212 gives a typical strip (shown in monochrome and reproduced with her permission):





### THE PHYSICAL CHANGES IN GIRLS AS THEY GROW UP



# 24

## Caring enough about customers to write to them clearly

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**GUIDELINE** *Treat customers fairly with clear, well-written correspondence.*

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Semiliterate letters and emails from organizations great and small have become so common they seem almost normal, though they're no less annoying for that. In this chapter I use several examples from my own experience. At the end, I also show a few really good letters, because clearly some organizations do care—even if serial complainers have to push them to do so.

In his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988), Gabriel García Márquez writes:

Florentino Ariza moved through every post during thirty years of dedication and tenacity in the face of every trial. He fulfilled all his duties with admirable skill... but he never won the honour he most desired, which was to write one, just one, acceptable business letter.

Plenty of authors seem to share Señor Ariza's difficulty. While standard letters are sometimes decently written, I find that individual responses to questions or complaints rarely make sense, are full of grammatical and spelling mistakes, and use robotic jargon in which the authors seek to 'reach out' to me while 'touching base' and 'going forwards'.

Have a look at these short extracts. First, there's this muddled and meaningless effort signed by the chief executive of a leading eye hospital, responding to a complaint about a cancelled appointment:

Your appointment for the 26th January had to be cancelled because there were no clinics running that day. It is normal practice for access to all clinics for this day being denied, however this was not possible on this occasion due to the outreach clinics still running.

You have to hope their surgical procedures are more careful. Then there's this email from a 'business development consultant', which sounds as if it's about road transport but wants to help me attract more visitors to a website:

Thematic links always takes driver's seat for generating natural and directed traffic. A link from any unwarranted source underplays your website performance.

And this well-known retailer begins an email with such gibberish that even better punctuation can't put it right:

Further to our conversation this morning regards the estimates for blinds I have sent for the Make of Roman blinds I have spoken to my Manager regarding your comments.

It's as if the author has thrown words on the page like a handful of dice, in the hope that a coherent sentence will appear. In my experience, such examples are nearly always written by native English speakers with British-sounding names and, if I phone them, British accents. So we're not talking about authors who have English as a second language. Even if this were so, why would they have a customer-service writing job when their written English was so weak?

Baffling or browbeating the customers doesn't help

Sometimes, business language seems designed to intimidate, as in this email from a broker with whom I'd just insured a new car:

We thank you for insuring through Be Wiser Insurance. As part of our validation process please be advised that the following documentation is required from you:- 1. Additional Premium To Reduce Driving History.

In other words, after I'd driven the car for a while, Be Wiser wanted me to provide more *documentation* (read *documents*, in plain-speak) to *Reduce Driving History* (note the random capitalization). What documents

might they mean? I phoned them. It wasn't *documentation* they wanted, but a higher premium—another £30, to be precise, because I had nine years' no-claims discount and the insurer, LV=, would accept only a maximum of five years (don't ask why). Thus, my *Driving History* had to be *Reduced*.

Naturally, I refused to pay because Be Wiser had known of my nine years of claim-free driving when the contract was agreed. The firm then asked for £150 if I wanted to move away from LV=. When I said I'd rather put my case to the ombudsman than pay a penny more, Be Wiser contacted LV=. And, olé, the mysterious extra charge was waived.

Even the regulators screw up

By law, the UK's Pensions Regulator requires firms to enrol qualifying staff in private pension schemes. As a small-business owner, I was happy to do it. The regulator's hectoring tone was sometimes unpleasant, but I could see why its letters needed to bark at people who didn't comply. After enrolling my staff, I had to complete a compliance declaration online. Reader, I tried—for forty minutes. But the online form was so stupid, guiding me up ladders to nowhere and down snakes to the pit of despair, that I gave up. So I asked the regulator to send me a paper form instead. The staff refused, saying there was no such thing as a paper form—it didn't exist because everything had to be done online.

I complained to Mr C, the executive director of automatic enrolment. In a lucid and intelligent reply, he apologized and sent me the paper form I sought. So it did exist. His staff, it was clear, had been untruthful or misinformed.

I filled in the form but still the staff weren't happy. They demanded I also complete the compliance declaration through questions and answers over the phone. It was 'the law', they claimed. I said I'd be glad to comply if they'd just tell me which bit of 'the law' they were relying on, so I could check it for myself, since all legislation is now online. I was left on hold for twenty-five minutes, listening to a loop of

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, while my tormentor supposedly sought advice from a higher being. But he never returned to the phone and didn't call me back. So I complained, again. The regulator apologized, admitted that no such piece of law existed, and promised to 'personally provide feedback' to the staff who'd misinformed me. One can only hope the feedback didn't involve a savage beating in a darkened room.

Amid all this nonsense, the regulator's staff put their incompetence in writing with a series of error-filled messages:

- 'We send our sincere apologizes for any convenience that may have been caused.' (Read *apologize for any inconvenience*)
- 'We apologize that you feel this way about the Regulators services.' (Read *Regulator's services*; and of course it's not feasible English for the author to apologize for what I feel, making this a non-apology.)
- 'We apologize for the above process not being outlined earlier and for the inconvenience that it is has caused you.' (Read *that it has caused you*)
- 'We endeavour to ensure our records are updated accurately and an employer can be declared complaint at the earliest instance.' (Read *compliant*)

The staff also misspelt their manager's name wrongly, twice. Surely there must be a few people in high positions at a regulator's office who care about clear and correct expression. Anyone for a training course?

It's that full-stop problem again

One of the most common mistakes is not knowing that a full stop or semicolon is usually the correct punctuation at a sentence boundary (see chapter 10). The mistake occurs **six times** in this email from Hoover/Candy in 2017, which was responding to my complaint that they'd gone back on their call centre's promise to replace a broken appliance free of charge or at a large discount. I've put an [X] where all the full stops should be, but ignored other errors including *lose* for *lose*.

Thank you for your feedback[X], please note the contact centre staff are not aware that we factor a discount based on the age of the current appliance on a sliding scale[X] the newer the appliance the bigger the discount etc.

The appliance in question is over three years old[X] the discount applied is considered to be good[X] however, when you add VAT and carriage this is what takes the amount over the recommended RRP on our website.

We would not like to loose your mother as a customer[X] hence, on this occasion we are willing to add further discretionary discount based on the offer of model PU71/PU01001 current RRP of £89.99[X] the new price to you will be £64.99.

Hoover/Candy are not minnows. No doubt they have a training budget. Why not spend some of it on improving staff writing skills?

Sometimes, you just have to laugh, though. This response came towards the end of a bewildering correspondence with the Glass and Glazing Federation:

Thank you for your email and the attached. If you are unable to provide your guarantee, please provide us with proof of payment. Once received we will review and respond adoringly.

Perhaps *accordingly* was meant, but if a bit of adoration's on offer, it would be churlish to refuse.

What good writers do

Good writers exist somewhere in most big organizations. When writing to the public, they tend to do the same things and make it look deceptively easy:

- They assess the problem.
- They work out what they want to achieve (the purpose).
- They do a bit of planning, which gives them a clear structure.
- They use simple sentences, everyday English, and good punctuation.

In short, they do what much of what chapter 1 recommends. They probably have some well-directed empathy too—maybe they've even complained about bad service themselves. Here are a few short case studies showing their skills in practice.

**HM Revenue & Customs** (2016)—I complained to the government's tax collectors about their inability to explain why my late cousin's



estate couldn't reclaim tax she'd apparently paid on the gain from an insurance policy that paid out on her death. They seemed unable to understand why I couldn't fathom their jargon and obscure procedures, so I persisted. Finally, a letter arrived from 'Complaints Service Reply'. The author made a good start: 'I am sorry for the concern caused by our letter of 4 April.' Well done—this is a real apology, not the kind of phony one that says: 'I am sorry for any concern that might have been caused.' She then explained the problem using words that she knew from previous correspondence I'd understand:

The chargeable event gain certificate from the insurer shows the gain payable to Mrs Howard and the associated tax credit. The insurance company paid the gain out of profits upon which they had already paid tax to us. Mrs Howard then received a tax credit representing the tax paid by the insurer. This would allow her to offset this credit against any tax that may have been due on the gain.

Mrs Howard cannot claim a repayment of the tax credit, even though she does not have to pay [income] tax for this year. This is because she did not pay tax on the gain she received. Instead, she received a credit of the tax paid by the insurance company.

Of course, tax rules still seem obscure to the lay person, but at least the points are in a logical sequence, the sentences are reasonably short, and the author knows where to put a full stop. This may not sound like anything special, but how often does it seem beyond reach!

**Aga Rangemaster** (2019)—after several months of company ineptitude, a senior person at Aga finally realized what had gone wrong with the repair of a cooker and decided to resolve it. Suddenly, there emerged coherent English, proper punctuation, some empathy, and a settlement worth several hundred pounds:

Thank you for your time this afternoon. After reviewing the details of the case I can appreciate the frustration you have felt in trying to get the appliance repaired. I would like to reiterate my apologies on behalf of AGA Rangemaster for the service you have received. As a gesture of goodwill to try and restore your faith in AGA Rangemaster and demonstrate that we can improve on the service you have received, we would like to offer you 2 free years on the AGA Care Plan.

**M&S** (2013)—this well-written letter from Marks & Spencer uses short sentences, simple words, and a logical sequence. It also answers the complaint directly.

I am sorry to hear you found something unexpected in our product. I can imagine this must have been unpleasant. We take all complaints of this nature seriously and I want to ensure we establish exactly what this item is, and how it got into your food. I have sent it to our supplier, who will inspect and identify it. Once they have done this, they will send me a report. This process should take four to six weeks. When I have the report, I will be in contact again to update you on the findings of the investigation.

**Virgin Media** (2008)—this too is clearly written but in a much more colloquial and slightly self-mocking style that suits the brand image:

We're chuffed to bits you're staying with Virgin Media. From now on, you can keep getting more value, more flexibility and more fun. And when we say more fun, we mean it. We're talking hundreds of movies and music videos at the touch of a button. TV that stops and starts when you say so. Super-fast, reliable broadband and a phone and mobile service that just keeps on giving. To find out exactly what we're on about, rock on over to [virginmedia.com](http://virginmedia.com) and check out what's in store.

The next chapter explains how good management can help upskill an organization's authors so they can better meet the customers' needs.

# 25

## Overseeing colleagues' writing

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**GUIDELINE** *Supervise colleagues' writing carefully and considerately to boost their morale and effectiveness.*

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Gerald Ratner, managing director of a chain of 2,500 high-street jewellers, gave an after-dinner speech in 1991 in which he said: 'We also do cut-glass sherry decanters complete with six glasses on a silver-plated tray that your butler can serve you drinks on, all for £4.95. People say, "How can you sell this for such a low price?" I say: "Because it's total crap."'

A plain message, admirably candid, but problematic for anyone trying to sell jewellery to the nation. Long before the Internet and social media, public reaction was hostile. Soon the group's value had slumped by £500 million, Ratner's name was removed from every shopfront, and he was out of a job.

Writers don't usually make such spectacular mistakes in letters and emails to customers, and even if they do, the results are rarely so disastrous. But, over time, the drip, drip, drip of weak writing erodes customers' confidence and sullies the image of quality that most firms like to convey. This is why the management of writing is so important.

One approach is 'hands-off'—not intervening at all in what staff write in the belief they should take full responsibility. This sounds fine in theory but leaves quality to chance, and what goes uninspected tends to deteriorate.

Other managers are so hands-on their paw prints are evident in every sentence. Whatever their staff write is returned with a mass of red-pen or track-changed amendments, schoolteacher style. This

approach may spring from a good motive—the desire to produce lucid, unstuffy writing—or from a need to show who's in charge. Whatever the reason, the results are the same: managers spend too much time playing editor, and staff become demoralized because they don't know what's wanted or how to improve. This chapter tries to chart a middle way.

### Working with the team

For the sake of example, let's assume you're managing a team that answers complaints from customers. Though team members deal with many complaints by phone, they also write. Here are a dozen things you could do.

- 1 Ask the team how they recognize a good complaint response when they see it. Usually they'll agree with you (and me) that the letter should be relevant, accurate, well organized, clear, and concise. It should seek to rebuild customer relations and even strengthen them beyond the pre-complaint level.
- 2 Ask the team what you can do to help them achieve these things. You may be told a few home truths about how you should supervise their writing but you may also get requests for extra training, style guides, books on better English, dictionaries, and electronic style-checkers.
- 3 Show one of your own first-draft letters and ask the team to compare it with the final draft you sent. Ask for ideas on how the final draft could have been improved further. Be prepared to take criticism yourself without becoming defensive. Stress that nearly all writing can be improved by listening to other people's ideas.
- 4 Show some of the team's letters and ask them to pick out strengths and weaknesses. If there are problems with spelling, punctuation, sense, and tone of voice, team members will realize for themselves they'll have to improve. This can be painful at first, but foster an atmosphere in which writing can be discussed unthreateningly. If necessary, bring in a qualified outsider, such as a writing-skills coach or applied linguist, to take part in the discussion. The ghosts

at the meeting will be typical readers, but try to make sure their feelings and circumstances are represented.

- 5 Discuss the process of writing, particularly the need for planning by writers who use dictation machines or who type or speak directly on to word processors. Stress that planning will usually save time and raise quality.
- 6 When you ask a writer to respond to a long or difficult complaint, ask them to come back with a detailed plan of the key points. Discuss and agree it before they produce a full draft. This will make the purpose and content clear at every step and ensure they follow a clear track from the outset—see chapter 1.
- 7 Explain what standards you'll use to supervise writing. You'll be checking for the following points, which are based on the PROCESS method in chapter 1:
  - *Purpose*: Is the reason for the letter clear to the reader?
  - *Content*: Does the letter contain the right messages and deal with any relevant points the complainant made? Does it really show that the author has read and understood the complaint? Is it accurate, complete, and relevant? Is it defensible in the light of your organization's policies or the laws or regulations that govern you? If it's based on a standard letter, has it been tailored to the circumstances? Does it say what, if anything, the reader should do next?
  - *Structure*: Is the material organized in a logical sequence? Does it put the big news early? In a long letter, are headings used to help the reader navigate? If there's an apology, is it positioned early enough? (See the various models in chapter 2.)
  - *Style*: Are the points explained clearly in sentences of reasonable length with short paragraphs, active-voice verbs, and good punctuation? Is it free from officialese and business clichés? Is it as warm and friendly as the topic allows?

You can use these same steps to give authors constructive and organized feedback under the headings *purpose*, *content*, *structure*, and *style*.

- 8 Say that you will try to intervene as little as possible in the writing and that your interventions will seek to make genuine improvements without nit-picking. Your overriding question will be 'Is this

- letter fit to go?', not 'Is it perfect?' or 'Is it how I'd have written it myself?'
- 9 Promise that if you make substantial alterations to an author's draft, you'll explain why. This kind of feedback is vital.
  - 10 Make available the tools and information that will help staff do a good job:
    - Have a good dictionary available.
    - Copy and circulate press articles about words.
    - Consider asking known good writers in your department to act as coaches and advisers.
    - Make your copy of this book available to all. Even better, buy several.
    - Use an effective style-checking program. All of them have limitations because they can't assess the sense, logic, or structure of a document. StyleWriter, however, has been favourably reviewed in the computer press and is used by British and US federal government departments—[www.editorsoftware.com](http://www.editorsoftware.com).)
    - From time to time, circulate good letters from each month's output. Discuss them at your team meetings.
  - 11 Trust your writers. With guidance, they should be able to produce good work without constant supervision. You'll still keep an eye on things by checking copy letters when you want. Some authors will need more support than others.
  - 12 Do a survey of recent complainants that includes questions about whether they found the response letters clear and easy to understand. Commission an annual audit of a sample of your team's letters by a writing-skills firm or applied linguist.

### Making the right interventions

Let's consider two examples of writing that should have been substantially improved before they went out.

*Case history 1.* In the late 1980s, the UK was convulsed by a health scare about fresh eggs. Several people died and there were some 30,000 confirmed cases of food poisoning. The main cause was hens being fed chicken remains and faeces, according to the health minister of the day.

One firm of egg distributors (I'll call them Cockerel Brothers) asked shopkeepers to reassure their customers by displaying this notice:

Dear Retailer

As a valued customer, for Cockerel Brothers. We would like to assure you of our continual monitoring for anything which could affect the quality of our fresh eggs.

Cockerels have just undertaken a survey of all our feed mills which involved testing finished feeds and samples (scrappings) from the mills, and having them tested by the Public Health Laboratory. This has resulted in a programme of mill monitoring to prevent any bacterial build-up in our mills. We do not use any raw poultry offal meat, and dried poultry manure in our mills. We are taking these precautions to endeavour our feed is as free from harmful bacteria, as is humanly possible, and manufactured from only wholesome raw materials.

Reassuring, this certainly isn't. There is too much murky, repulsive, and memorable detail, and all the errors speak of the kind of carelessness that the notice is warning against, for example:

- the first sentence isn't complete and suggests that the writer is the customer, which would be nonsense
- *monitering* should be *monitoring*; *undertook* should be *undertaken*, in standard English; *endeavour* should be *endeavour*
- the commas after *meat* and *bacteria* are wrong and should be deleted
- it's aimed at the shopkeeper but ought to be aimed at the shopper.

No supervisor of writing should have let the notice go out untouched. There should have been a friendly, tactful conversation to discuss improvements so that the author could have emphasized the product's good qualities. It might have said:

Dear Customer

- Our eggs are fresh and healthy.
- We give our hens high-quality food and continually monitor and test it.
- We do not feed our hens on chicken remains or manure.
- Our priority is to produce eggs that are wholesome and safe to eat.
- Please contact us on [phone number] if you'd like any further reassurance.

A competitor firm decided that saying less was a far better way of saying more. Its notice simply said:

### **EDENDALE EGGS**

#### **Healthy Eggs from Healthy Hens.**

*Case history 2.* A housing association is writing to several hundred tenants to explain why modernization work has been delayed. It's an important letter:

#### Bathroom modernization

First of all apologies for the delay in the start of the bathroom refurbishment programme which was due to start at the end of last year but because the costs came in over budget, further negotiations had to be entered into with the contractors and the extent of the work reconsidered.

Although all the work to the bathroom will be undertaken as previously agreed, we will not be undertaking any work to ground-floor WCs which you may or may not have.

Find attached a draft programme for the anticipated commencement date on your property and we anticipate that the work will take three or four days to complete. Your next contact will be by the contractor, GH Construction, who will contact you individually about a week prior to the start at your house.

If you anticipate any problems with access arrangements or require any further information, please do not hesitate to call Jane Teal on [phone number].

The first question a supervisor needs to ask is 'Is this fit to go?' My answer would be no. The writer has arranged the points logically and there are plenty of personal words like *you* and *we*, but officialese, jargon, passives, and long sentences abound.

You'd need to discuss the letter and praise its good points, but perhaps show a reworking of the first paragraph as an example of what to do with the rest. It would be useless—and demoralizing to the writer—to redraft the whole letter, though you could provide guidance notes in the margin. Helpful coaching should enable the writer to produce a letter you could pass as 'fit to go'.



Taking one paragraph at a time, I've underlined possible insertions and shown deletions for the whole letter:

Bathroom modernization

~~First of all apologies~~ I apologize for the delay in the start of the bathroom ~~refurbishment~~ modernization programme which was due to start at the end of last year, ~~but~~ The delay has occurred because the costs ~~came in over budget,~~ were higher than we had budgeted for. ~~further negotiations had to be entered into~~ We have had to negotiate again with the contractors and reconsider how much work we could afford ~~the extent of the work reconsidered.~~

This splits the long sentence into three and puts the verbs in the active voice.

~~Although all~~ All the work ~~to the your bathroom will be undertaken~~ done as previously agreed, ~~we.~~ But unfortunately the extra costs mean that if you have a ground-floor toilet, we will not be undertaking able to do any work to ~~ground floor WCs which you may or may not have it.~~

I've left the first verb in the passive because it will put the stress on *all the work to your bathroom*. The other changes split the sentence in two and remove the burling expression *may or may not have*. It would, of course, be preferable to send one letter to tenants with ground-floor toilets, and a slightly different letter to the rest.

~~Find attached~~ I attach a draft programme ~~for that shows the anticipated commencement likely starting date for work~~ on your property. ~~and we anticipate that the work~~ We expect the work will take three or four days to complete.

This splits another long sentence and uses simpler vocabulary.

~~Your next contact will be by~~ You will hear next from the contractor, GH Construction, who will contact you ~~individually about a week prior to the start before the work at your house~~ begins.

This strengthens the first verb and adds another in place of the noun *start*.

If you ~~anticipate~~ think the contractor will have any problems with access ~~arrangements to your house,~~ or if you need require any further more information, please ~~do not hesitate to~~ call Jane Teal on [phone number].

This uses a few more words in the cause of certainty but also gets rid of waffle. In the final, complete version below, the last sentence has been turned round so that the shorter *please* clause comes first:

#### Bathroom modernization

I apologize for the delay in the bathroom modernization programme which was due to start at the end of last year. The delay has occurred because the costs were higher than we had budgeted for. We have had to negotiate again with the contractors and reconsider how much work we could afford. All the work to your bathroom will be done as previously agreed. But unfortunately the extra costs mean that if you have a ground-floor toilet, we will not be able to do any work to it.

I attach a programme that shows the likely starting date for work on your property. We expect the work will take three or four days to complete. You will hear next from the contractor, GH Construction, who will contact you about a week before work at your house begins.

Please call Jane Teal on [phone] if you think the contractor will have any problems with access to your house, or if you need any more information.

The focus group were asked whether they perceived any difference in clarity between this last version and the original. The average clarity rating was 14 points out of 20 for the original, 17/20 for the revision. Twenty-five out of 35 people expressed a preference for the revision. The fact that eight preferred the original (with two scoring them equal), and that the scores were so close, is a reminder that no one can please all the people all the time and that audience reaction is rarely uniform. It might even suggest that the letter was fit to send in its original state—a rather sad outcome for plain-English devotees!

#### Final thoughts

Criticizing someone's writing can be unnerving for them. So, before you intervene, always consider how you yourself would feel about it. Remember also that editing is far easier than creating the first draft, so always give due praise.

It's fair for you to want a high standard of clarity and grammar. But no two writers will ever use exactly the same words or tone of voice, so trying to impose uniformity will be both demoralizing and futile.

For those whose writing is criticized, the director-general of the UK's Health and Safety Executive offered this comforting advice in 1988: 'If your draft is rewritten at a higher level, do not despair. Seek to learn from the experience. And bear in mind that a piece of work can be good (and may be appreciated as such), or be very helpful but not usable in its original form.'

# 26

## Writing better instructions

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**GUIDELINE** *Devote special effort to producing lucid and well-organized instructions.*

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In his 1960 hit single *Three steps to heaven*, Eddie Cochran set out the vital stages of his happiness procedure: first, ‘you find a girl to love’; second, ‘she falls in love with you’; and third, ‘you kiss and hold her tightly’.

Regrettably, instructions for consumer goods are rarely so simple. But when these products can cause injury and death if not properly assembled, maintained, and used, the instructions need to be very clear.

Unusual or technical vocabulary is one cause of difficulty. People using the medical dressing Mepilex Lite must cope with such terms as *minimizing maceration, peel forces, moist wound environment, compromised skin, exudate, skin stripping, adherent side, excoriation, fixate Mepilex with a bandage or other fixation, and dressing regimen*. Just as surprisingly, the text is printed in barely legible type. (*Pikestaff* 70, Plain Language Commission, 2014)

Product manufacturers and users often think differently about what instructions are for. Manufacturers may be most concerned about compliance with regulations and protection from lawsuits, which can mean very long and detailed instructions that make for daunting reading. Users mainly focus on unlocking the value in their purchases and avoiding harm.

### Examples of ambiguous or blindingly obvious instructions

- On a motorcycle mirror: ‘Remember: objects seen in the mirror are behind you.’
- On a bottle top: ‘Pierce with pin, then push off.’
- On the door of a health centre: ‘Family planning—please use rear entrance.’
- In an aircraft maintenance manual: ‘Check undercarriage locking pin. If bent, replace.’ (A worker examined the pin. It was indeed bent, so he reinserted it instead of using a straight pin. The plane crashed.)
- For a fridge freezer: ‘Do not store live animals inside.’
- ‘Do not block toilets with nappies or sanitary products. Use litter bin on left.’
- On a steam iron: ‘Don’t iron clothing while it is being worn—you’ll injure the wearer.’

Experience of abysmal instructions leads many people to read them only when all else fails. When his car clock broke down, the executive of a US carmaker tried to reset it using the approved company handbook. He couldn’t. Next day he began a project to rewrite the whole manual in language that a highly paid corporate captain—and perhaps the rest of us, too—could understand. Such searing experience is often the spur to writing better instructions—unless bad documents have driven you to distraction, you might never feel the urge to write them better.

An experiment by University of Michigan psychologists (reported in 2008) found that people equated the ease with which they read and processed instructions with how complex they thought the task itself would be. In other words, if the instructions looked difficult, they thought the task would be too.

Bad instructions are bad for business, or should be. Customers may think twice about buying from a company whose instructions have proved useless before. In some countries, consumer protection regulations require that instructions and safety information accompanying

a product are taken into account when deciding whether it's faulty. Manufacturers can be held liable for injury or damage caused by poor safety information. Selling unsafe consumer goods can lead to criminal prosecution.

You'd think that instruction manuals for chainsaws, one of the most lethal products consumers can buy, would be super-clear with well-captioned diagrams and pictures. Yet after trialling several manuals myself, I assessed them as being good in small ways but confusing in big ways that could make them dangerous to novice users, with unclear or simply false explanations of main safety features like the chain brake. The failings included illegible or meaningless diagrams; nonsense headings like *Cutting a felling tree*; tiny print; and high-level language like *Double insulation... obviates the necessity of having the machine earthed, A damaged hand guard... may render the brake inoperative, and To avoid housing deterioration carefully remove all packed sawdust around clutch*. (For more on this, see 'Instructions for consumer products: as easy as 1-2-3?' via <<http://www.clearest.co.uk>>, under 'Publications'; and *Pikestaff* 71—same website—for an example of good practice in a chainsaw manual.) Every year in the US, 36,000 people are injured in chainsaw accidents, though, of course, puzzling instructions may be only one of many factors.

So, what goes wrong when instructions are being written, and how can problems be put right? Usually some of the following six principles are broken, which can help us see how to make improvements.

### Principle 1: Remember the readers

Usually readers haven't used the product before—that's why they're reading the instructions. But what else can you find out about them? Will they be technically knowledgeable or complete novices? Will they be children or adults? Under what conditions will they be using the instructions? Learning about these things and making the right assumptions will affect the words and structure you use. An experienced carpenter might readily understand the instruction *Screw pendant bolts into door plates using cheese-head screws*, but most do-it-yourselfers would need an illustration of pendant bolts, door plates,

and cheese-head screws. Everyone, though, will benefit if you say a little at a time. So instead of:

Placing the paper on a pasting table, use a pasting brush to apply the paste evenly, brushing towards yourself and making sure the edges are well covered.

you could write:

Place the paper on a pasting table. Use a pasting brush to apply the paste evenly, brushing towards yourself. Cover the edges well.

## Principle 2: Favour a basic style of language

This often means using the command form of the verb, the imperative, which states the action early and keeps the message simple:

Set this tool correctly for best performance. Read the instructions carefully before use.

—instead of using a long-winded passive-voice style:

This tool needs to be set correctly if optimum performance is to be gained. It is recommended that the instruction booklet, located inside the packing, is read thoroughly before use.

Let's say you are instructing office staff how to fill in this box on a computer screen:

New Cost Centre Code  
New Cost Centre Name  
Parent Cost Centre Code

Using the passive voice you could write:

The code of the new cost centre should be entered into the New Cost Centre Code field. The name of the new cost centre (maximum 40 characters) should then be entered into the New Cost Centre Name field. The code of the parent cost centre should then be entered into the Parent Cost Centre Code field. When satisfied, the 'Do' key should be pressed to commit the new cost centre to the database.

Or you could write it much more crisply in the imperative, with bullets:

- Enter the code of the new cost centre into the New Cost Centre Code field.
- Enter the name of the new cost centre (maximum 40 characters) into the New Cost Centre Name field.
- Enter the code of the parent cost centre into the Parent Cost Centre Code field.
- When satisfied, press 'Do' to commit the new cost centre to the database.

This is simpler because the readers know from the first few words of each sentence what action they have to take. Even simpler would be to assign numbers to the three fields:

<b>New Cost Centre Code</b>	<b>[1]</b>
<b>New Cost Centre Name</b>	<b>[2]</b>
<b>Parent Cost Centre Code</b>	<b>[3]</b>

and then write

- Enter the correct code in field 1.
- Enter the correct name (maximum 40 characters) in field 2.

and so on.

### Principle 3: Split the information into chunks

Readers waste time and make mistakes if information is buried in long paragraphs. In this example, a local council inspector is explaining to a cafe owner how to do his washing-up hygienically. Notice there are no numbered steps—just one long paragraph. It all looks too boring and complicated. If you feel like skipping it, that's probably what the owner and his staff thought too.

After the preliminary sorting of the utensils and scraping off of food residues into the refuse containers, the utensils should be washed in the first sink, piece by piece, in clean hot water at a temperature of about 60°C with a detergent added.



This temperature is too hot for the hands and the operative should wear rubber gloves and use a dish mop. The water should be changed as often as it becomes dirty or greasy. After this, the utensils should be suitably arranged in the wire baskets available for immersion in the sterilising sink. The utensils should be placed so that no two pieces touch each other and that all the surfaces of every piece are exposed to the rinse water. The rinse will be ineffective if plates or saucers are piled on top of one another or if cutlery is merely heaped in the basket. The sterilising rinse in the second sink should be of clean hot water without added detergent or chemical and at a temperature of not less than 77°C and the utensils should remain in the water for a full two minutes. At this temperature care should of course be taken not to immerse the hands. The purpose is to raise the temperature of the utensils to that of the water so that they will air-dry almost instantly on removal. The temperature of the water should be maintained at about 77°C throughout and accordingly this sink should be fitted with a device to record the temperature of the water. When the two minutes are up, the basket should be removed from the sink and stood temporarily on a draining board and as soon as the utensils are dry and cool enough to be handled, they should be put in a clean place awaiting re-use.

The words are reasonably plain, the punctuation is sound, and none of the sentences is impossibly long. But the whole thing needs splitting into short paragraphs (**chunking**) and transforming into the imperative. First we need an introductory sentence, perhaps this:

You should make sure your staff follow these instructions.

then the points need redrafting in the imperative:

- 1 Sort the utensils and scrape off waste food into the bins.
- 2 Wash the utensils in the first sink, piece by piece, in clean hot water at a temperature of about 60°C with a detergent added. This temperature is too hot for your hands, so wear rubber gloves and use a dish mop.
- 3 Change the water as often as it becomes dirty or greasy.
- 4 Put the utensils in the wire baskets available for immersion in the sterilising sink. Arrange the utensils so that no two pieces touch each other and that all the surfaces of every piece are exposed to the rinse water. The rinse will not do its job if plates or saucers are piled on top of one another or if cutlery is merely heaped in the basket. The sterilising rinse should be of clean hot water without added detergent or chemical and at a temperature of at least 77°C.

- 5 Put the wire baskets containing the utensils in the water for a full two minutes. At this temperature, take care not to immerse your hands. The purpose is to raise the temperature of the utensils to that of the water, so that they will air-dry almost instantly on removal. Maintain the water temperature at about 77°C throughout. To check this, make sure the sink is fitted with a suitable thermometer.
- 6 When the two minutes are up, remove the basket from the sink and stand it temporarily on a draining board.
- 7 As soon as the utensils are dry and cool enough to be handled, put them in a clean place awaiting re-use.

These improvements have arisen not from a total rewrite but from two simple structural tactics (chunking and numbering) and one simple style tactic, the use of imperatives. All 35 members of the focus group preferred the revision. They gave it an average clarity rating of 18 points out of 20, compared to a (generous) 10/20 for the original. The rewrite needs more work, particularly in paragraph 4, and headings should be used. But it's going in the right direction. Today, it's also possible to give a link to online guidance and perhaps a video.

#### Principle 4: Use separate headed sections

Normally it's wise to split the instructions into separate sections whose headings identify the purpose of each action. A common sequence of sections is:

- *Introductory explanation, overview, or summary:* This tells readers the purpose of the activity, what it will achieve, and how long it should take. Sometimes users with experience of similar tools or equipment will benefit from a quick-start procedure. In long instructions, a contents list will help.
- *Tools or materials required:* Giving this information saves readers having to stop the job whenever a new tool is needed.
- *Definitions:* These explain any terms the readers may not understand. Definitions may also be needed of everyday words carrying special or limited meanings in the instructions.
- *Warnings:* If these come after the instructions, they are useless and could be dangerous. Warnings should be given twice: once in the introduction

and again just before the instruction to which they relate. Make clear that the warnings must be obeyed and are not just recommended practice. Could the product be modified to eliminate the hazard? Where possible, resist the desire to warn of the obvious in an effort to avoid lawsuits. For example, a label on a children's scooter warns *This product moves when used*; a digital thermometer warns *Once used rectally, the thermometer should not be used orally*; and a bag of cat litter warns *Should not be used as a traction aid on ice and snow*. For more about using warnings in instructions, signs, and labels, see 'Warning design' by M S Wogalter and C B Mayhorn, in *Information design: research and practice* (see 'General sources').

- *Main text*: split into headed sections.

The factory notice (see tinted panel) shows one way of splitting up text by using headings. Like most of those in the notice, the headings should be predictive and, if possible, stimulating. Label headings like *Spillages* or *Storage* are weaker than *What to do about spillages* or *How much should be stored?*. Headings also compel the author to group like with like.

### **Code for use and maintenance of Dominion ink jet printers**

#### **Type of substances**

Dominion inks use the solvent base methyl ethyl ketone, 'MEK'. MEK-based inks and solvents are all highly flammable and pose a serious fire and explosion risk if not handled properly.

#### **Is it dangerous to breathe near the vapour?**

In normal use there is no health hazard from inhaling the vapour. If spills are being cleaned up, wear respiratory protective equipment.

#### **Avoiding skin contact**

Dominion inks and solvents are not very poisonous but you should still avoid skin contact. If there is a risk of spills or when cleaning up spillages, wear solvent-resistant gloves and goggles.

#### **How much should be stored?**

Store as little of these substances as possible in the workroom. Never store more than 50 litres (including waste liquids). Storage should always be in metal cabinets purpose-made for highly flammable liquids.

### **Clearing up spills**

Mop up small spills with industrial wipes or other dry material. After use, put the wipes in a purpose-made fire-resistant lidded bin. Absorb larger spills using a non-combustible material such as sand or Nil-flam absorbent. Departments should ensure they have enough materials and equipment to deal with spills.

### **Dried inks**

Deposits of dried ink are highly flammable, so take great care to avoid spills. Clean up dried deposits regularly using non-sparking scrapers. Dispose of the deposits safely.

### **Use of printers in safe areas**

Printers should only be used and maintained in an area free from risk of ignition of flammable vapours. Keep the area well ventilated, particularly at low level. Eliminate sources of ignition such as naked flames and hot elements. Prohibit smoking. Use reduced-sparking tools where possible.

### **Fire**

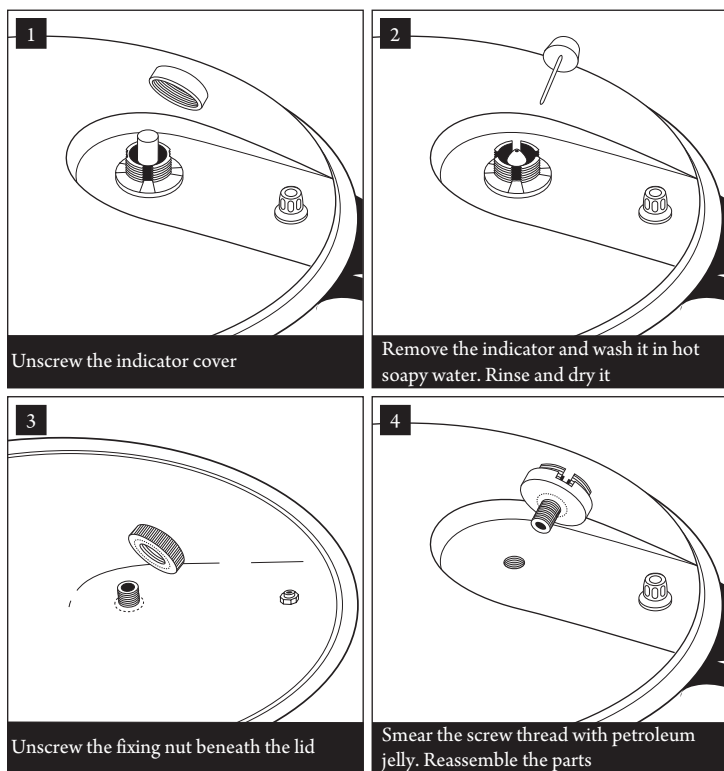
Suitable extinguishing agents are carbon dioxide, dry powder, alcohol-resistant foam and Halon. Large fires should only be tackled by trained firefighters. If containers get heated, isolate any nearby electrical supply. Then cool the containers by spraying them with water from a safe distance.

Principle 5: Use clear illustrations with good labels and captions

If a message can be simply conveyed in words, there's no need for illustrations (and vice versa). Words are good for getting abstract ideas across, for dealing with fine differences in meaning like 'could be' and 'might be', and for referring to things the reader has already learned about. Illustrations are good at showing what things look like and their relative size; this can save words and illuminate the words that remain. Sometimes comprehensive illustrations will avoid the need for words, which will save translation costs. The Haynes manuals on car and motorcycle maintenance, which have sold more than 200 million copies worldwide, use many photographs.

Whether you are buying or creating illustrations (or photos), you may like to consider such things as:

- using exploded-view format (useful for self-assembly products as they show how the item is put together)
- showing enlargements of particular parts so that readers can focus on the relevant point easily
- placing the illustration near the text—ideally people should be able to refer to it as they read



Instructions for maintaining a pressure-cooker lid

- presenting an object at an angle of view that clearly shows the parts concerned or the action to be taken, keeping objects to scale
- ensuring that any typesetting included in the illustration will be legible if scaled down to fit the document.

A now common alternative to a written document—at least for fairly simple procedures—is to publish a video on YouTube or a similar platform.

The instructions (see previous page) for maintaining a pressure-cooker lid integrate text and pictures in a straightforward way.

### Principle 6: Test with typical users

This is the most important principle, because users' performance is the key. Instructions for dangerous tools and for child seats in cars are rarely pretested with users. Children are killed and injured every year because child seats are fitted wrongly. In 2008, Derbyshire safety officials found that of 193 seats they checked, 66 per cent were wrongly installed. In the US, where car crashes are the leading cause of child deaths, a survey of 3,500 'child restraint systems' in 2006 found 73 per cent were badly fitted.

Car-seat instructions are often baffling. This is from the top of the left-hand page of a two-page spread in a booklet from one of the best-known providers:

How to fit the Club Class Extra Rearward Facing

Have you checked that your baby weighs less than 13 kg?

In this weight range you must only install the Club Class Extra rearward facing.

But at the top of the right-hand page, the booklet says:

How to fit the Club Class Extra Forward Facing

Have you checked that your baby weighs more than 9 kg?

In this weight range you must only install the Club Class Extra forward facing.

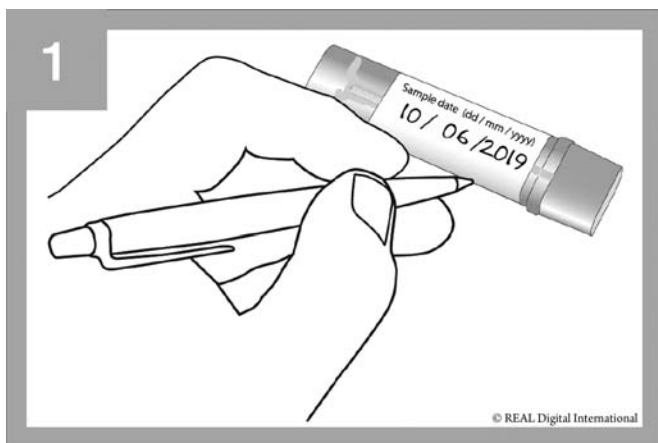
Each part is clear but taken together they are nonsense because a child of, say, 11 kg fits into both weight ranges. So readers may be confused even before they've tried to fit the seat.

If your budget allows, hire a specialist usability company to test your instructions on real people. Failing this, give them separately to a few typical readers—preferably unconnected with you or your work. Watch them trying to use the instructions with the product. Don't intervene unless asked (then give minimal help) or unless there's danger. Observe any false steps they take. Discuss how they got on, without leading them. Ask about any misinterpretations they made. Redraft the instructions in the light of what you find. Test again if possible. The reason for testing with individuals is that focus-group members may influence each other—see 'How to conduct readability research according to the standards of professional market and social research' by Susan Bell, *Clarity* 63, May 2010 (Clarity International).

Labels and leaflets for drugs and other medical products sold in the European Union must pass face-to-face clarity tests with real consumers. Guidance on how to test is available on the Web under *Guideline on the readability of the labelling and package leaflet of medicinal products for human use* or *ENTR/F/2/SF/jr (2009)D/869*. This is also a good source for testing all instructions, not just those for medical products. The guidance says:

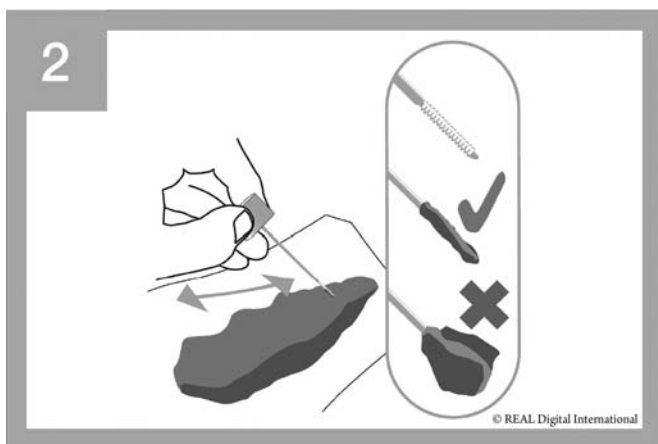
A satisfactory test outcome... is when the information requested within the package leaflet can be found by 90% of test participants, of whom 90% can show that they understand it. That means to have 16 out of 20 participants able to find the information and answer each question correctly and act appropriately.

Even so, some unusual phrasing occasionally slips through. A box of the iron supplement *Ferrograd C* includes a leaflet that warns of something nasty that could apparently affect furniture: *Your stools may turn black whilst taking Ferrograd C*. (Some companies and health authorities now use the vernacular *poo* on its own or give it as an explanation for *stools*.) Then the leaflet says, *Ferrograd is not recommended for children under 12 years old. Acute iron poisoning is a serious risk in the paediatric population*. But what does *paediatric population* mean to most people? It would be clearer to say *among children under 12*.



Writing the date on the bottle.

Write the date on the sample bottle in biro. Use a container or layers of toilet paper to catch your poo. Do not let your poo touch the toilet water.



Collecting the sample.

Twist the cap to open the sample bottle. Collect a sample by scraping the stick along the poo until all grooves are covered. We only need a little poo to test. **Please do not add extra.**

This section from the instructions issued to the over-50s in the UK as part of the NHS bowel-cancer screening test-kit uses basic language (average sentence length is under ten words) and pictures to show how to collect a poo sample. (© Crown copyright 2019)



A company in New York found how easily mistakes could occur if they didn't pretest. As part of a school education programme, they distributed a batch of pencils carrying the slogan *Too Cool to Do Drugs*. But a schoolboy, Kodi Mosier, soon noticed that as he sharpened his pencil the message changed to become *Cool to Do Drugs* and then *Do Drugs*. The company recalled the pencils and reprinted the words with *Drugs* at the sharp end.

# 27

## Clarifying for the Web

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**GUIDELINE** *Don't waffle on the Web—put the big news early and make the style and structure punchy.*

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You've visited plenty of websites, so you already know a lot about writing for the Web. What caught your attention, kept you reading, or turned you off? Maybe some of these:

### ***Attention catchers***

- Interesting and relevant content in highly legible type.
- Predictive headlines, saying what's to come.
- Attractive graphics and pictures.
- Big news stated early on each page, perhaps with a summary of main points at the top.

### ***Attention keepers***

- Writing that's easy to read, flows logically, and has a consistent voice that reflects the brand's identity.
- Key words and phrases picked out in bold type.
- Short paragraphs (40–50 words), short sentences, active verbs, and personal words—particularly *you* or *we* or both.
- Credibility and trustworthiness—increased by high-quality graphics, good writing, and the use of outbound hyperlinks, which suggest that authors have read widely and are happy for users to visit other sites.

### ***Turn-offs***

- The opposite of all the above.
- Spelling and punctuation errors.

- Links that fail.
- Puffery—pompous self-promotion and marketing hype.
- Pages that have too many eye-catching elements or are text-heavy.

Little new, then, here—most of the previous chapters are also relevant to Web writing. But people do read differently on screen from how they read on paper, so some rethinking is needed. The main difference is that they tend to scan webpages quickly and read far less than authors may like. Also, readers will take their own route through a website and it won't be as linear as for a paper document. For excellent articles and videos on Web writing, see <<http://nngroup.com/topic/writing-web/>>, particularly 'Plain Language Is For Everyone, Even Experts' by Hoa Loranger (2017).

This chapter:

- re-emphasizes some points that are important for Web writing
- examines research results on what makes Web writing effective
- considers some technical points that will make your webpages more effective
- analyses some examples of Web writing.

The chapter is not a full guide to creating effective websites. It gives brief points only, which you can discuss with any design professional you may decide to hire. To help the amateur, some hosting services offer guided DIY options.

### Get help and plan

Ideally, hire a good Web designer, early. Check for competence by examining sites they've built and asking how they'd tackle your requirements.

Prepare a horizontal plan of your website that shows the hierarchy of the information you want to include—see chapter 1. To pick up some ideas, look at the site maps you'll see listed at the bottom of some home pages, e.g. for Halifax bank, Tesco, and the Post Office. You'll probably have to write most of the text yourself—designers who claim to offer copywriting brilliance have been known to disappoint.

## Create scannable text

Most readers of paper documents won't pore over every word, following the argument in all its subtle logic and hoping that when they reach the end there'll be a lengthy appendix full of more detail. Even more so with websites. Busy and literate people rarely read webpages word for word. Instead they scan, picking out individual words and sentences. User-testing by Dr Jakob Nielsen in 1997 ('How Users Read on the Web', <<http://nngroup.com/topic/writing-web>>) found that 79 per cent of people always scanned any new page they came across but only 16 per cent read word for word.

To help online users, webpages should be easily scannable. This means using things like:

- key words highlighted by bold type, colour, hyperlinks
- meaningful (not punning or quirky) subheads
- bulleted lists
- one idea per paragraph—readers who aren't hooked by the first few words will skip the rest
- half or less of the wordage of paper texts—people read only 20 per cent of the average webpage
- figures for numbers—eye-tracking data shows that '23' catches more attention than 'twenty-three'.

Nielsen found that the inverted-triangle structure was best (see also chapter 2). This means starting with the big news (usually the conclusion) in the first two or three paragraphs. Early, you need to get across the five Ws and the H—who, what, where, when, why, and how.

Brevity and clarity are vital because if users don't find what they want almost immediately, they'll go elsewhere. They are window-shopping for information and spending time, their most precious asset, flitting between stores to see what takes their fancy. If you don't hook them, they'll go to another site.

Eye-tracking studies show that Web users tend to scan pages in an F-pattern. They first read in a horizontal scan, usually across the top

part of the content area—the top bar of the F. Next, they move down the page a bit and read across in a second horizontal scan that's typically shorter than the previous movement—the F's lower bar. Finally, they vertically scan the content's left side. This may be a quick scan or a slow and systematic scan that forms the stem of the F.

There are clear implications for Web authors, says Nielsen: 'Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their F-behavior. They'll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.'

Studying performance, which he calls 'usability', Nielsen found a remarkable difference when users read varying styles of text on the Web. He averaged their scores on several measures, including task time and errors on questions. One style of text was linear, promotional, wordy, detailed, and dull, like this:

Nebraska is filled with internationally recognized attractions that draw large crowds of people every year, without fail. In 1996, some of the most popular places were Fort Robinson State Park (355,000 visitors), Scotts Bluff National Monument (132,166), Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum (100,000), Carhenge\* (86,598), Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (60,002), and Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park (28,446).

A second style was more scannable and, though bland, used more concise and neutral language, like this:

In 1996, six of the most-visited places in Nebraska were:

- Fort Robinson State Park
- Scotts Bluff National Monument
- Arbor Lodge State Historical Park & Museum
- Carhenge\*
- Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer
- Buffalo Bill Ranch State Historical Park.

Nielsen found a 124 per cent increase in usability of the scannable text over the linear text. (The asterisk in each sample is to show that Carhenge was hyperlinked.)

## Build attractive and accessible pages

### *Organizing material well*

- Just as newspapers put their best stories ‘above the fold’, so you should put your best stuff in the top third of the typical user’s screen, remembering that screens tend to be wider than they are deep (i.e. ‘landscape’) and that the browser’s menu bar will occupy some of the screen. If users have to scroll down to find something, they may never see it. If possible, avoid the need to scroll unless the extra page breaks that result would cause confusion.
- Articles, documents, and large bodies of information need summaries at the top to help readers decide whether to go further. The summary should be brief. Make some general points about the piece and some specific points to illustrate each general point.
- If you’re a website editor, try to prevent being swamped by contributors who think their lengthy documents will inform the public. You’ll need to shorten the text, split it into chunks, summarize it, and add headlines. Providing a link to a PDF can enable you to shunt thousands of words into a downloadable format for those who want the detail.
- A headline has to work harder because it may not appear only above the text it refers to. For example, it may join a contents menu, too. As usual, write the headline after you write the story. Make sure it can stand alone away from the story, if necessary, and still make sense. If headlines and sub-heads appear in a clickable list on another page, they may also need to make sense as a set.

### *Page design: key points*

- Keep the page design simple. Put your important stuff in a single main column, so people don’t have to scan several columns; this also helps users of low-vision aids. For other ideas, see the Simplification Centre’s website, which splits pages in different ways for different purposes: <<http://simplificationcentre.org.uk>>.
- Make the navigation simple by placing the main choices in a linear menu. This helps users decide where to go next, so they don’t have to scan the whole page for options. Put the menu on every page so users don’t get marooned. This also helps users who don’t enter the site via the home page.
- Keep the line length reasonably short, say 50–60 characters and spaces, and make the text left-aligned rather than centred—it will be easier to scan and read.

- Add space between paragraphs rather than indenting the first line; this enables people to locate the starting point more easily when scanning, and makes pages more spacious.
- Favour black type on a white background. White type out of a dark green background can also work well but makes the layout less flexible.
- Don't go berserk with colour. Use it functionally, say for a particular level of heading or in solid blocks.
- Use fonts that look highly legible on the Web. Four such are Verdana, Trebuchet MS, Tahoma, and Georgia. Verdana (which was designed for on-screen reading) works well at small sizes. These fonts are reasonably 'websafe', i.e. they are cross-platform for Microsoft and Macintosh, though less good on Linux. (Useful articles: <<http://yourhtmlsource.com/text/webtypography.html>>; <<http://ampsoft.net/webdesign-1/>>.) You'll have these fonts on your computer or be able to see them on the Web.
- Use a limited palette of websafe fonts—perhaps one for headlines and one for body type. Where possible, use proportional font sizes. These enable users to increase the font size in their browsers while retaining most of the site format. Choose websafe fonts that, while highly legible, reflect the personality you want for the site.
- Use 'cascading style sheets' (<<http://www.howtocreate.co.uk/tutorials/css/fonts>>). These enable your site to meet different users' needs, where appropriate—for example, by being available in easy-to-print, mobile (handheld), or screenreader-friendly formats.
- Make the pages cross-browser compatible, e.g. on Firefox, Microsoft Edge, Safari, Opera, and Chrome.
- Write an 'alt tag' (alternative text) for all images (e.g. 'image of...' or 'image linking to...'). This helps visually impaired users. Most screenreading software can't read text on images.
- Add informative captions to graphics. Even a picture worth a thousand words will often need some explanation.
- Optimize search. Ideally, a user's first search should answer the question. All search hits should yield a short, easy-to-read summary. Make your site tolerant of searchers' misspellings.
- Comply with good accessibility standards, so that users with impairments are not disadvantaged further. See, for example, <<http://w3.org>> and <<http://shaw-trust.org.uk>>.
- If you put audio files on your site, make transcripts available.
- Write informative links or, if this isn't feasible, say *click here*.

## Help people find your site: the essentials

People use search engines, directories, etc. to search for sites with relevant content. Unless your site is high in the search results, few users will click through to it. So there are some key things to do, though search engines aren't easily fooled by anything phoney.

- 1 Try to get inbound links from high-status websites (e.g. newspapers). Major newspapers mirror some of their content online, so if they review an aspect of your business, their review may include a link to your website.
- 2 Write first paragraphs for each page, and particularly the home page, that include the words people will use to search for the things you offer. Say you are running a small guest house in the Peak District of Derbyshire, England. Your first paragraph might say: 'Luxury bed-and-breakfast (B&B) accommodation in the Peak District of Derbyshire, with recently modernized ensuite rooms and free wireless Internet. Business people, walkers, and tourists are welcome to our beautifully furnished Georgian farmhouse in the pretty village of Burbliing-on-the-Water just off the A515. We're close to Buxton, Chatsworth, Bakewell, and the best scenery in the area.'
- 3 Write effective meta tags (data that helps some search engines to categorize your pages). The most important meta tags are:
  - the page title (what the browser puts at the top of the screen), e.g. *luxury bed-and-breakfast (B&B) accommodation, Burbliing-on-the-Water, Derbyshire—homepage*
  - the site description, e.g. *Miss Pelt's bed and breakfast, B&B accommodation at Burbliing-on-the-Water in the Peak District National Park, Derbyshire, UK*
  - the site keywords, e.g. *bed and breakfast, bed-and-breakfast, B&B, b + b, accommodation, Burbliing on the Water, Burbliing-on-the-Water, Peak, District, National, Park, Derbyshire, A515, Buxton, Chatsworth, Bakewell, Matlock, guest, family, room, luxury, tourist, tourism, walking, information, business, commercial, special, events, retreat, weddings, weekend, week end, weak end, break, brake, holiday, holliday, market, secure, parking, acomodation, accomodation, accommodation*. It's good to include common misspellings for the things you offer.
- 4 Add fresh content regularly; search engines find this attractive.



Check your site thoroughly for errors, nonsense, and officialese

Web English is far less clear and accurate than it should be. Even high-profile sites have gross errors of spelling and punctuation. These mistakes, which would live for years in a printed book, can be corrected quickly if they're noticed. Often, though, they disfigure a site for months, and may undermine the boasts of high quality and attention to detail so commonly made by the site owners for their products. For example, the bullets below quote a small fraction of the error-strewn and jargon-riddled text on the website—i.e. the shop window—of a nationally advertised bespoke sofa maker. I've added square brackets with corrections and comments—some trivial, admittedly—in case the company chiefs are reading this book (why abandon hope?):

- 'Available here online or tailor made [read *tailor-made*] to your design in our over 55 stores across England and Wales.' [Omit *over*, unless the stores are only for the over-55s, in which unlikely event, hyphenate. If you have 57 stores, why not say so?]
- 'You can chose [read *choose*] one here, [omit comma] from our website or go to one of over 55 stores nationwide, where you [omit *you*] our dedicated team of experts will help you design your own bespoke extra large [read *extra-large*] sofa.'
- 'Just because a sofa turns into a bed [add comma] it doesn't mean you have to compromise of [read *on*] comfort or style.'
- 'Whether you are looking for a small sofa to [omit *to*] for a compact living space or even a conservatory or guest room, you are bound to find one to suit your interior needs [what they?]. We have put together a collection of small sofas to suit your lifestyle and with dismantling options [what they?] and [omit *and*] now available the size of your room need not hold you back.'
- 'The armchair is one of our most adaptable pieces of furniture; [use colon not semicolon for this job] a compliment [read *complement*] to you [read *your*] sofa, a smaller seating option for a compact space, [add *or*] a cosy spot to settle down with a book by the fire, [omit comma, insert full stop and delete the rest of this tosh] the armchair fulfills [read *fulfils*] all these criteria and more.'

No one knows whether such grim writing really affects sales. If the price is right and the pictures pretty enough, perhaps people will disregard everything else.

Cut waffle to make the text more scannable

Here's a short example of how to examine a piece of Web text critically and, by cutting dross and putting the big news early, make it more scannable.

The clear and catchy headline in a financial newsletter is 'Corporate bonds could provide good value.' The first paragraph, though, is a let-down for the busy Web user:

Fixed interest investors can be excused for considering that the present financial crisis provides an excellent chance for showing their skills and the implementation of rational analysis.

What's the big news here? That it's time for fixed-interest investors to show their skills—what skills?—in some unstated way? That it's time for them to rationally analyse something, again unstated? The next paragraph sheds little light:

While those favouring company shares, especially the devotees of 'growth', look askance at the sliding market indices, there is a very reassuring satisfaction at being able to look at the reliability of bond yields.

Might you make more money if you invested in bonds not shares? It's hard to know. The quote marks on *growth* only add to the mystery. The final paragraph is a tangle of words in search of a message:

They are, of course, heavily dependent on the course or, at least, the market's expectation of, interest rates and, over the last two years, these rates have oscillated several times between moving up and down.

Over the three paragraphs the average sentence length is about 30 words—that's 50 per cent more than in the 'quality' newspapers. Any big news has been buried in verbiage and readers take a poor return from their effort. If they get beyond the second paragraph, they'll have done well.

Using the inverted triangle and being miserly with words, the author might have said:

Investing in corporate bonds is worth considering now.

In a crisis, when share prices are on the slide, bonds can give you much more solid and reliable returns.

But those returns will depend on what the market thinks will happen to interest rates—as well as what actually happens to them.

In half the words of the original, this gives readers three simple messages: it may be a good time to invest in bonds; why this may be so; and one of the factors that may affect the prospects for bonds. The average sentence length is 17 words. Being clear and much more scannable, it's more likely to catch and keep the user's attention. The author can then say more about what corporate bonds are and how to buy them.

# 28

## Making legal language lucid

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**GUIDELINE** *Apply plain-English techniques to legal documents such as insurance policies, car-hire agreements, laws, and wills.*

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The way some lawyers write is disappointing to their friends and obnoxious to their clients. ‘Excrementitious matter’ and ‘literary garbage’ was how the nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham described legal English. While every profession tends to cloak its mysteries in unusual language, lawyers have done so more thoroughly than most. Yet legalese is not sacred, and it’s one of the few social evils that can be eradicated by careful thought and disciplined use of a pen. Many lawyers despise it, realize it brings them into disrepute, and work hard to remove it. Some of them campaign for plain legal language through an international group, Clarity. Its former chairman, Mark Adler, pulls no punches:

Why do lawyers write so that no one can understand them? They say it is because they need to be precise, and that their language has been honed by centuries of litigation. But this is baloney. The real reason is that, although they are paid for their skill with words, most lawyers are dull and clumsy writers who have not broken the bad habits they learned as students.

Plain legal English is not a new idea. Back in 1887, A J G Mackay (a Scottish sheriff) wrote in the *Law Quarterly Review*: ‘Good drafting says in the plainest language, with the simplest, fewest, and fittest words, precisely what it means.’

In the twenty-first century, it remains a pity that law students are rarely required to attend seminars on how to write good, clear, expressive English. Too many of them emerge from college with miserably low writing standards, never having had their work revised by an editorial pencil that prizes good punctuation and a punchy, unpretentious style.

The Internet has intensified the need for clearer legal writing. Much legislation and many court judgments are readily available online, destroying the old argument that legalese is acceptable because only lawyers read the law. In *Clarity for Lawyers* (2017), Mark Adler and Daphne Perry say [my italics]:

In the UK, two million separate users a month visited the free-to-access legislation at [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk) in 2012–13. Research by the National Archives, which runs the site, shows that *60 per cent of these users are non-lawyers* who need to use legislation for work; for example, a police officer, a local council official or a personnel manager. Another substantial category of users was *members of the public seeking to enforce their own rights* or those of a friend or relative.

This open access has exposed some hideous rubbish to widespread scrutiny. Parliamentary counsel (the UK government's law-writers) have reacted by trying ever harder to clarify the drafts of new laws. The unreformed stuff stands like a ghastly portent, warning everyone of a rutted road much travelled.

It's true that lawyers sometimes have to write about complicated things, but this isn't the main reason they march in step with the Fog People. The culprits are their own choices: archaic vocabulary, tortuous sentence construction, and disorder in the arrangement of points—plus a deep and unconscious emotional attachment to the status they think legalese gives them. So the task is to persuade lawyers that any fool can make a complex topic sound difficult or use rare words to show off, but that it takes real skill to clarify.

### Changes under way

In 1999, among other reforms of the civil court system in England and Wales, the Lord Chancellor ordered antiquated Latin and English

expressions to be replaced by more modern or exact English. Here are some of the changes:

Original	Modern
discovery	disclosure
<i>ex parte</i>	without notice
further and better particulars	requests for information
<i>in camera</i> /in chambers	in private
<i>inter partes</i>	on notice
interrogatories	requests for information
leave of the court	permission of the court
minor/infant	child
next friend/guardian <i>ad litem</i>	litigation friend
plaintiff	claimant
pleading	statement of case
subpoena	witness summons
summons/motion	application
taxation of costs	assessment of costs
taxing master	costs judge
writ	claim form

In the US in 2007, after four years' work by a committee of judges, lawyers, and the plain-language expert Professor Joseph Kimble, the Supreme Court approved a new clarified version of the 300-page Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The rules govern the procedure in all US federal trial (district) courts. Judges and lawyers rely on them daily, the rules serve as models for state courts, and law students study them in a year-long course. Here's an example of the difference that

plain language made (don't worry—the 'after' version would make sense to US lawyers!):

*Before* 'When two or more statements are made in the alternative and one of them if made independently would be sufficient, the pleading is not made insufficient by the insufficiency of one or more of the alternative statements.'

*After* 'If a party makes alternative statements, the pleading is sufficient if any one of them is sufficient.'

Some of the biggest London law practices describe themselves, with differing degrees of justification, as plain-language firms. At Linklaters, one head of department told his staff: 'We are paid for the words on the paper and we should never forget that. We have spent a lot of money on our brand, and a key part of our brand is the clarity of our documents.' For some years, the law firm Denton Wilde Sapte (now Dentons) employed a plain-language coordinator who said: 'We have found that plain language editing always raises legal questions... We end up with a better document, in substance as well as in style.' These firms also realize that the more international they become, the more customers and colleagues want clarity of expression—legal matters that cross national boundaries are complex enough without obscure language adding to the muddle. Clear language is also easier and cheaper to translate, when necessary.

Organizations that want to win the confidence of customers should give them comprehensible legal agreements to sign. Now that there are many examples of clear, well-organized insurance policies, credit-card conditions, and tenancy agreements, it looks bad to remain locked into legalese. This 80-word sentence, for example, comes from Next Retail Ltd's standard credit agreement (downloaded 16 March 2019):

If we, at our discretion, allow you to enter a repayment plan with us and you successfully complete your repayment plan with us and start making normal payments under the Agreement again we will allocate payments in the same way as set out in clause 8(a) except that any arrears that remain on the account which pre-date you entering your repayment plan with us, excluding outstanding default charges, will be rescheduled so that they become part of your remaining balance.

It takes only a little skill to split this monster into at least four sentences, for example:

It may be that we allow you to start a repayment plan with us and you successfully complete it and begin making normal payments again under the Agreement. If so, we'll allocate your payments in the same way as in clause 8(a). However, we'll reschedule any remaining arrears that pre-date your repayment plan with us, except for any default charges. These arrears become part of your remaining balance.

The myth is slowly crumbling that obscurity is necessary or part of the price customers are willing to pay. Indeed, with some lawyers charging more for an hour's work than their customers earn in a week, it seems only fair that the writing they provide as part of their service is easy to understand. However, few plain-English contracts have cracked the problem of extreme length. Conditions for credit cards, mortgages, tenancies, and social media accounts often run to 6,000–10,000 words and, despite customers ticking a box or signing to say they've read them, few have. So while such contracts can act as effective reference documents if a dispute occurs, they still deprive customers of real choice at the outset. An early and honest summary of the main points would perhaps help, as would a summary of each section's main points at the start of that section.

What else can be done about legalese?

All the techniques described so far in the book can be used in legal documents, though they need to be harnessed to legal knowledge and a desire for precision and accuracy. There needs to be a bit of armour-plating too, because some readers will try to misinterpret a text in their favour. Certainty of meaning is, therefore, even more important than usual, but plain English—if well and cautiously used—can make an important contribution to certainty. Even if lawyers cannot blithely replace legal-technical terms like *negligence*, *indemnify*, and *estoppel* with one-word equivalents, they can often provide separate explanations or glossaries. It helps that in most legal documents only a few words are genuinely technical—about 2 per cent, according to



Professor Kimble. The rest are plain words with ordinary meanings, or legally scented words that can be replaced by plainer ones or struck out as redundant. This spells death, or at best very limited life, for the three ugly brothers *hereof*, *whereof*, and *thereof*, their kissing cousins *herein*, *hereinafter*, and *hereinbefore*, and their wicked uncles *hereby*, *thereby*, and *whereby*. Such legal flavouring has virtually gone from modern UK laws, which proves how unnecessary it is in other documents.

Even if you're not a lawyer, you can play a part in counteracting legalese by questioning its use wherever it appears. For example, you may be asked to comment on documents written by your own organization's lawyers. Be prepared to comment on content as well as style and structure. The lawyers may not thank you for invading their territory, but you have something useful to offer—the ability to see the document as non-lawyers will see it. 'Why do we have to write it in this strange way?' remains a potent question. The answer 'Because it's legal!' seems inadequate in an age when lay people feel they have a right to understand.

The clarification of legal documents would make a book of its own, so I want to examine just four easy techniques:

- Replace or remove legal flavouring.
- Chop up snakes.
- Put people into the writing.
- Add headings.

You may have seen worse examples of legal writing than those that follow. I've chosen them because they're understandable to the general reader while still showing many of the commonest faults.

Replace or remove legal flavouring

**Case study 1** In this extract from a car-hire agreement, there's legal flavouring and pomposity (underlined):

In the event of car breakdown the owners must at their own expense effect the collection of the car and perform repairs thereto.

The sentence is also ambiguous—lawyers will argue that only the collection would be at the owners' expense, not the repair. But let's assume that both collection and repair are free to the hirer, which is probably what's meant. We can then replace the legalese with plain words. *In the event of* becomes *if*; *thereto* becomes *to it* or *to the car*; and *must effect the collection* becomes *must collect*. Losing its ambiguity and making the point more briefly, the sentence becomes:

If the car breaks down, the owners must collect and repair it, both at their own expense.

**Case study 2** A local government department is asking people who apply for a replacement car-parking pass to sign a form. I've underlined the legal flavouring:

I hereby declare that the information given above is correct to the best of my knowledge and that I have conducted a thorough search for the said pass and honestly believe that the same cannot be found by me. I agree that in the event of the said pass being found by me I will forthwith return the same to the City Engineer.

All the legal flavouring can safely be removed:

- *hereby* just means *by this writing*.
- *the said pass* is no more specific than *the pass* since no other pass is in question. If there were several passes, you'd call them *pass 1*, *pass 2*, etc.
- *the same* is legalese for *it* or *them*.
- *forthwith* has been interpreted in many ways by the courts—so use the simple *immediately* or state a number of days.

The legal flavouring doesn't make the form incomprehensible and it may impress some readers. But is it any less impressive in plain English?

I declare that:

- the information given above is correct to the best of my knowledge
- I have conducted a thorough search for the pass and cannot find it
- I agree that if I find the pass, I will immediately return it to the City Engineer.

**Case study 3** Pruning shears are the most appropriate tool for attacking this example, in which a city requires a householder to cut

back his hedge. Again, the legal flavouring and pomposity are underlined:

Whereas a hedge situate at Dean Road, Moreton belonging to you overhangs the highway known as Dean Road, Moreton aforesaid so as to endanger or obstruct the passage of pedestrians.

Now therefore the Council in pursuance of section 134 of the Highways Act 1959 hereby require you as the owner of the said hedge within fourteen days from the date of service of this notice so to lop or cut the said hedge as to remove the cause of danger or obstruction.

If you fail to comply with this notice the Council may carry out the work required by this notice and may recover from you the expenses reasonably incurred by them in so doing.

If you are aggrieved by the requirement of this notice you may appeal to the magistrates' court holden at Moreton aforesaid within fourteen days from the date of service of this notice on you.

The legal flavouring can be revised or removed:

- *Whereas* is common and well understood, but here its use is pointless and creates an incomplete sentence. It can be struck out.
- *situate* means *situated* or *at*.
- *Dean Road, Moreton aforesaid* just means *Dean Road, Moreton*. If there were two Moretons, the correct one would need to be specified by adding the county or postcode—*aforesaid* doesn't aid precision.
- *Now therefore* is redundant.
- *in pursuance of* can be replaced by *under* or *for the purpose of* or *using*.
- *hereby* is redundant, as it means *by this writing*. However, if the author insisted it was vital, it could be kept as it's not a hard word.
- *so to lop or cut the said hedge* just means *to cut the hedge* or *to trim the hedge*. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives *lop* as *cut off the branches, twigs, etc., from (a tree)*, so there is no need for both *cut* and *lop*. An alternative would be *cut back*.
- *fail to comply with* is wordier than *disobey*.
- *incurred* is an unusual though very useful word. Here, we can omit it and just say *its reasonable expenses*.
- *aggrieved by* could become *disagree with*.
- *holden* is a medieval relic meaning *held*.

With dross swept away and new words underlined, the notice could read:

~~Whereas You are the owner of a hedge situate at Dean Road, Moreton belonging to you~~ which ~~overhangs the highway known as Dean Road, Moreton aforesaid so as to endangering or obstructing the passage of pedestrians. Now therefore the~~ The Council in pursuance of, under section 134 of the Highways Act 1959, ~~hereby~~ requires you ~~as the owner of the said hedge~~ within fourteen days from the date of service of this notice ~~so to lop or cut the said hedge, removing as to remove~~ the cause of danger or obstruction. If you ~~fail to comply with~~ disobey this notice, the Council may ~~carry out the work required by this notice~~ choose to cut the hedge and ~~may~~ recover from you ~~the expenses reasonably incurred by them in so~~ its reasonable expenses in doing so.

If you are aggrieved by ~~the requirement of~~ this notice, you may appeal to the magistrates' court ~~holden at Moreton aforesaid~~ within fourteen days from the date of service of this notice on you.

That draft would be fit to show to a lawyer to check for legal accuracy. The focus group agreed the revision was much clearer. The 34 who responded gave it an average clarity rating of 18 points out of 20. The original notice averaged only 8/20. Three police officers in the group, accustomed and perhaps a little loyal to the peculiarities of law language, each gave the original a generous 15 points.

### Chop up those snakes

Long sentences are another blight in legal documents. Sentences in bank overdraft agreements have been known to stretch to 900 words, monstrosities that show contempt for the readers as well as befuddling them. This 77-word sentence from an office equipment lease between Bigg, the owner, and Tiny, the company renting the equipment, tries to explain what happens if the equipment breaks down:

If the equipment shall go out of order, Tiny shall at its own expense have the equipment repaired by the person, firm, or body corporate designated by Bigg and in the event of Tiny failing so to do then Bigg shall be entitled to take possession of the equipment and have it repaired at the cost of Tiny and during such possession and repair, the lease charges shall nevertheless accrue and be payable by Tiny to Bigg.

Clearly the sentence can be split into three where one part of the story finishes and another begins. This preserves the meaning of the original and all its word order:

If the equipment shall go out of order, Tiny shall at its own expense have the equipment repaired by the person, firm or body corporate designated by Bigg, ~~and in~~ In the event of Tiny failing so to do, then Bigg shall be entitled to take possession of the equipment and have it repaired at the cost of Tiny. ~~and during~~ During such possession and repair, the lease charges shall nevertheless accrue and be payable by Tiny to Bigg.

Then you can replace all the *shalls* with *must* or a verb in the present tense, or both (see chapter 11). You can also rewrite legalese like *in the event of* and *nevertheless accrue*. The new text would say:

If the equipment goes out of order, Tiny must at its own expense have it repaired by a person chosen by Bigg. If Tiny fails to do this, Bigg may take possession of the equipment and have it repaired at Tiny's expense. During such possession and repair, Tiny must still pay the lease charges.

A long sentence is sometimes unavoidable in making a complex point that has exceptions and qualifications attached. Then, it needs to be managed well, with simple construction, everyday words, and perhaps a bullet list (see chapter 8).

Put people into the writing

Most legal agreements are about what both sides of a bargain must do and not do. It makes sense to give the two sides convenient names at the start of the agreement and use them throughout. So *John Fustian of 97 Sackcloth Court, Woolton* might be identified as *Fustian*, and this term, along with *he*, *his*, and *him*, could be freely used for the sake of brevity. In standard-form agreements it's now common to define the bargain-makers by personal pronouns, which can aid clarity. In an agreement to lease a vehicle, the two sides could be defined thus:

'We' means the lessor, Misfit and Snaggs Motors plc, The Yard, Sumptown.

‘You’ means the lessee, Paul Olio, 7 Rag Street, Pumpton.

The words *we*, *you*, *our*, and *your* could then be used, improving every sentence in which they appear. It would mean the end of this kind of horror:

The lessor will register details of this lease and the conduct of the lessee’s account with any licensed credit reference agency. The lessor may also disclose this and any other information supplied by the lessee to any member or associated company of the Scottish Bank plc group of companies or to any person acting on the lessee’s behalf for any purpose connected with the group’s business. The lessor may also use the lessee’s name and address to mail the lessee about services that may be of interest to the lessee.

Instead it would be possible to write:

We will register details of this lease and the conduct of your account with any licensed credit reference agency. We may disclose this and any other information you supply to any member or associated company of the Scottish Bank plc group of companies or to any person acting on your behalf for any purpose connected with the group’s business. We may use your name and address to mail you about services that may interest you.

Add some relevant headings

In this deed, lawyers for the local authority involved are trying to rectify a mistake by using highly traditional and legalistic language:

THIS DEED IS MADE the tenth day of January 20XX BETWEEN THE MAYOR AND BURGESSES OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BOREHAM of Civic Centre Boreham BU8 2AW (hereinafter called ‘the Council’) of the one part and Brian Tony Taggart and Miriam Mary Taggart both of 22 Vernon Road Farfield (hereinafter called ‘the Purchasers’) of the other part.

WHEREAS:-

- 1) By a Transfer dated 27 May 19XX and made between the parties hereto the property known as 22 Vernon Road Farfield (hereinafter called ‘the Property’) was transferred to the Purchasers as therein contained
- 2) The said Transfer contains a plan purporting to delineate the property transferred

- 3) The said plan does not correctly delineate the property transferred and the plan annexed hereto and marked 'plan No. 2' signed by the parties hereto and dated the tenth day of January 20XX correctly delineates the property

NOW THIS DEED WITNESSETH: –

The said Transfer shall at all times be read and construed as if the plan therein referred to was the said plan No. 2 and not the plan originally annexed thereto but in all other respects the parties hereto confirm the said Transfer

IN WITNESS whereof the Council has caused its Common Seal to be hereunto affixed and the Purchasers have set their hands and seals the day and year first above written

The points look a bit frightening but the main issue is fairly simple. There was a mistake in the plan attached to the original transfer documents and the parties want to rectify it by attaching a new plan. So Mr and Mrs Taggart would probably like a clear document they can refer to, perhaps in several years' time, and understand immediately without going to a lawyer.

By grouping the information carefully under headings, any brainy lawyer could produce a decent plain-English rewrite. One possibility is as follows, and as long as the document is signed as a deed and witnessed properly, it will work.

## **Deed of Amendment**

Date: 10 January 20XX

### **Parties**

- 1 London Borough of Boreham, Civic Centre, Boreham BU8 2AW (the 'council').
- 2 Brian Tony Taggart and Miriam Mary Taggart, both of 22 Vernon Road, Farfield (the 'buyers').

### **Background**

- 1 A transfer dated 27 May 19XX between the parties transferred 22 Vernon Road, Farfield (the 'property') to the buyers.
- 2 The transfer contained a plan ('Plan 1') that showed the property incorrectly.

## Outcome

The plan attached to this deed ('Plan 2') correctly shows the property. It was signed as correct by the parties on 10 January 20XX.

The transfer is to be read as if Plan 2 and not Plan 1 had been attached to it. In all other respects, the parties confirm the transfer.

## Signatures

Signed as a deed on 10 January 20XX:

- by the council's authorized officer—
- by the buyers—

Witness to the buyers' signature—

Though that was only a short example, its use of headings and simple style can be applied when much more complex matters have to be expressed in legal terms.

Plainer writing, clearer judgments

A 17-page judgment by Mr Justice Peter Jackson has been widely commended for its plain language (full judgment: *Lancashire County Council v M* [2016] EWFC 9).

Seeing a judgment written so tersely raises questions about why judges would write in any other way in any other case in any other court. How much time and money would be saved if the Jackson style were taught in law schools and widely adopted by the judiciary?

It begins: 'This judgment is as short as possible so that the mother and the older children [aged 12 and 10] can follow it.'

The judgment makes much use of short paragraphs, contractions, short sentences and the active voice. The tone is humane but forthright. It refers to Mr A, a British Muslim convert who wanted to take his children to Syria in dangerous times under the guise of a trip to Disneyland, Paris. It explains why the children should have only limited contact with him. At the time, Mr A was facing trial for trying to buy guns and ammunition. *The Times* (15 September 2016) says it understands Mr A has since been convicted. Here is part of the judgment.



For several weeks before Mr A was arrested in November, he was being secretly recorded by the police. I have read a lot of those recordings. They show what Mr A really thinks and how he hides it from the mother and the children.

In the recordings, Mr A says that he would sacrifice his life for his religion. He shows his hatred for this country because we are unbelievers who do not live under sharia law. He says that Islam is against democracy and voting. He pulled down posters encouraging people to vote that had been put up in one of the mosques. He wants Britain to be a Muslim country. He wants Muslims to be above non-Muslims. He wants men to be above women. He hates gay people. He says that Mr B is not fit to be a father because he has used drugs.

Mr A agrees that he said these things but says that he didn't mean them, and that he was desperate because the children had been taken away for no reason. I do not believe that. His explanations were ridiculous. And I don't accept that he only started to hold those views after the children were taken away.

After thinking carefully about this and listening to everyone, I do not agree with Mr A at all. People are not out to get him. His problems are his own fault. I do not know why he was trying to buy guns and whether he is dangerous to everyone. The jury will decide about that. What I am clear about is that he is dangerous to the children and their mother because of the way he behaves and because the mother is not able to stop him. There is a good side to Mr A—everyone has a good side—and this makes it hard for H and A [the children] and their mother to see what he is really like.

When he gave evidence, Mr A was more interested in making speeches than answering questions. He says that there is a plot by police and social workers to smash up his happy family just because he is a Muslim. He clearly doesn't feel responsible for anything that has happened. He accused everyone of being sneaky liars who have taken his whole life from him. The truthful people are locked up and the liars are free. He has nothing to lose: "If you want me to be a terrorist, then that's what I'll do."

Mr A is very sorry for himself but I noticed that he never showed he is sorry for the mother or the children. Instead, he wants them to feel sorry for him. They shouldn't be. For him, they are not the most important things. What is most important to Mr A is Mr A and whatever views he holds at the time.

## Invasion of the Fog People

The following invitation to a conference in Portugal in 2019 was emailed to me and several hundred others. Headed *Please feel free to circulate* (so I'll oblige), it provides a spectacular example of a writing style that some academic lawyers feel is acceptable. It was meant for people interested in the rarefied field of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), but even so the level of complexity and pretentiousness is striking. Many of the intended readers would have been non-native English speakers.

20th International Roundtable for the Semiotics of Law (IRSL 2019)

*Theme: The Limits of Law*

In a time of plurality and difference which is also, significantly, a time of aproblematic (if not naïf) panjuridism, the discussion of the limits of law is not a frequent or obvious explicit topos. On the one hand, the diagnosis of plurality and difference favours the conclusion-claim that «the sense of the expression the “law” is constructed internally, and separately, within the system of semantic values of each [semiotic] group» (B.F. Jackson)—which means arguing that only «the signifier» is common, not the «signified», as well as admitting an implacable diversity of interpretative communities (involving incommensurable cultural-civilizational, political, ethical and professional codes or canons). On the other hand, the celebration of panjuridism, successfully corroborated by the relentless emergence of ultra-specialized dogmatic fields (from health law to biolaw, from robotics law to geo-law), justifies a passive assimilation of hetero-referentially constructed interpretations of social need, reducing law to a mere conventional order (with contingently settled frontiers) or even to an ensemble of institutionally effective coactive resources—which in any case means depriving juridicity or juridicalness of any practical-cultural specific or intrinsic (non-contingent) sense claim. However, do our present circumstances condemn us to this complacent nominalism, preventing us from attributing any effective relevance to the problem of the limits of law? Even without departing from the “semio-narrative” ground (and its external point of view), it may be said that plurality and difference do not exclude a productive exploration of inter-semiotic aspirations (if not inter-semiocity)—relating differently contextualized claims of juridicity

and paving the way for the reconstruction of plausible arguments of continuity. These arguments may, in turn, justify a return to the well-known questions on the concept and/or the nature of law (in the sense in which, in an all or nothing approach, Hart and Raz have taught us to understand this), and may also, conversely, lead to the reinvention of an archetypal or aspirational perspective (Fuller, Simmonds), in relation to which the reconstituted features of the autonomy and the limits of law do not represent characteristics but rather guiding intentions or constitutive aspirations or promises (if not desiderata), with reference to which past or present expressions and their institutional instances should permanently be judged. Following this path in fact means acknowledging how the problem of limits becomes an indispensable thematic core whenever the reflexive agenda involves rethinking law's autonomy (or rethinking this autonomy beyond the possibilities of legal formalism), as an autonomy or claim to autonomy which should be seriously considered in terms of its cultural-civilizational specific (non-universal) base, as a decisive manifestation of European identity and European heritage (Castanheira Neves). It is precisely this critical-reflexive connection between issues of sense and limits (aspirations and borders) which, in terms of law, as well as considering the challenges of a *société post-juridique* (F. Ost), our roundtable aims to explore. This means discussing the growing weight of hetero-referential elements (invoking philosophy and economics, literary criticism and sociology, epistemology and ethics, politics, political morality and social engineering as plausible key arenas), which not only interfere (as contextual conditions) with juridical discursive practices but also wound these practices (and their autonomous intelligibility) by functionalizing them (diluting their specificity in a new practical holism), or at least condemning them to permanent «boundary disputes» (David Howarth). However, this discussion also leads directly to the consideration of specific (real, hypothetical and even fictionalized) case-exempla, including the so-called «tragic cases» (Atienza), which enable us to experience the limits of law's responsivity or even the impossibility of obtaining plausible correct legal answers. The roundtable will, as usual, favour a practical-cultural context open to multiple perspectives and involving the productive intertwining of juridical and non-juridical approaches.

As some lawyers might say, *res ipsa loquitur*—‘the thing speaks for itself’.

# 29

## Writing low-literacy plain English

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**GUIDELINE** *For people with low literacy, cut out the fine detail, be brief, and (ideally) test your documents with the real experts—the readers.*

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Who needs this kind of writing?

Several groups of people cannot cope with materials for average readers. One obvious group is those whose first language isn't English. They fall on a spectrum: at one end are people who use the Roman alphabet and can read a language with similarities to English; at the other are those lacking education and unable to read any language—they take much longer to learn and some may never become fluent readers.

Another group have reading difficulties arising from health problems such as stroke or brain injury. Heavy drug or alcohol misuse, and the lifestyle that sometimes goes with it, also affect reading. Old age, too, can impair reading as vision and memory fade. Some people's reading will be temporarily affected by short-term stress (e.g. a medical appointment or police interview) or long-term stress (e.g. poverty or living with an abusive partner). Those who leave school young may have weak skills; teenagers with problems such as dyslexia are often in this group.

And there are people with cognitive impairments (referred to here, for brevity, as PCIs). Some are only mildly affected, while others are so severely disabled they may never read. However, many can read to some extent and more could do so if the writing were simpler.

For each group there'll be some differences in the kind of writing they need. For instance, people learning English will benefit from text that is relatively formal, while PCIs will do better with colloquial wording, as often their speaking skills far exceed their reading skills.

The UK's Department of Health website provides a free, downloadable 40-page guide about producing 'easy read' documents called *Making written information easier to understand for people with learning disabilities* (2010). The British Dyslexia Association has a webpage about producing dyslexia-friendly documents, called *Dyslexia Style Guide 2018*. Also useful is the 64-page guide *Creating clear print and large print documents* (Goo3), from the website of the UK Association for Accessible Formats.

### Testing is the key

The most important thing is testing, as people who read and write fluently can only guess what these groups can understand—they are the experts to consult. For newcomers to English, hold focus groups. You can sometimes arrange them through agencies for migrants. Sometimes a language class may try out the materials you're preparing, or maybe a special group can be convened. Many are happy to help writers, as they benefit themselves.

If it's impossible to run focus groups, a quick one-to-one test may be feasible, perhaps with someone you overhear speaking a foreign language. Or someone stuffing envelopes in an office—a job sometimes taken by PCIs—may help during a coffee break. Migrant organizations or agencies for PCIs may be able to find someone you can talk to. Ask the reader to describe what actions they might take after reading the material; what the pictures are saying; and what they learned from the text.

For PCIs, it's best to get them to work on documents with you, say, in groups of about three. Try to find people whose reading ability is very limited. Support workers tend to suggest people who can read fluently, but they are not very useful because—like you—they are guessing what will be hard for others to read. Several meetings may be

needed before people gain the confidence to speak up. They need to feel they won't lose respect if they admit they don't understand. You can overcome shyness by explaining they'll be helping others. Ask them to use their own words to explain what they've read. One person, asked what *values* meant, said *jewellery* (i.e. valuables). Ask for suggestions for clearer words.

Sometimes complete non-readers can also take part in the sessions. They're often skilled at commenting on pictures. A group with mixed abilities is best. Ask those who can read to speak the text aloud, as this helps to expose problems.

Keep sessions shorter than two hours, as the work is intensive and tiring. Payment is vital: it helps to keep people interested in what can be tedious work, and raises their often low incomes.

In the UK, the Norah Fry Research Centre uses 'inclusive research' techniques that enable people with low literacy to contribute towards documents intended for their benefit. Its website shows some of the videos and leaflets they've helped produce.

### Preparing low-literacy materials

Prepare the materials in the same way as for average readers, only more so. Similar principles apply: short paragraphs, very short sentences, familiar words, active voice, and good layout. There's one big difference: with most plain English for average readers, you're aiming to replicate most of the meaning in what you're clarifying; but for low-literacy readers, near-equivalence is rarely possible or even useful. Explaining or clarifying every word and phrase in a legal document, for example, may triple the original's length and still not be readable. You have to consider how much text the readers will tolerate and whether even a definition will be enough to explain harder terms. To help people cope, you must cut. It's better to include the minimum and add a phone number for people to call if they want to know more. A four-pager that's read is more use than a twenty-pager on the shelf. A two-fold A4 leaflet is a good size for many people. If needed, you can create a family of short leaflets with text on related

topics. People can read them when they want, rather than being hit by a blockbuster.

### Using difficult terms

Sometimes you have to use a difficult term. This is better than baby language. Immediately include an explanation, in brackets or a separate sentence. After all, readers will probably hear the word in daily life. So you could describe a *counsellor* (a hard word) as someone who is trained to listen and help sort out problems. Terms familiar in a person's life may be fairly easily learned in print. So, for instance, people with Down's syndrome can often read *syndrome* and even *chromosome*, while migrants often recognize *migrant* and *sponsor*.

Even so, minimize the number of difficult terms. A glossary at the end will help people learning English. Others are less likely to use it and need the definition immediately. Dictionary definitions are seldom helpful to readers as they use equally hard words. Sometimes a children's dictionary can help you, as can the plain-language word lists in this book. But you may just have to manage on your own, with the help of your testing teams.

### Language that's dumbed down or cleared up?

Low-literacy plain language—now sometimes called 'easy read'—is indeed more stilted than the norm; sentences are shorter and don't always flow. Sometimes the words may look repetitive or oversimplified. This is why some people complain about language being dumbed down. You don't need to use baby words (*bunny* instead of *rabbit*) but yes, the style may seem awkward compared with normal speech. Those who need this kind of writing won't complain, though.

Often, you'll need not merely to remove one harder word and insert a simpler one, but to alter the entire phrase or sentence. So, for a committee's duties, instead of *Terms of reference*, you can say *What we do*.

You'll need to decide what to do with stuff that's interesting but not vital—perhaps park it in a side panel. Often there's a compromise between lots of good information and just enough.

Short words help, but aren't enough. For instance, many PCIs struggle with *decide* and *choose*. You can substitute *pick*, but even that sometimes causes confusion—not that it's hard to read, but because a literal thinker will be looking for an object to pick up. A good alternative may be *You can make up your own mind about x*.

Simple tenses help. Words ending in *-ing* often cause difficulty for PCIs and newcomers to English. So, instead of *Are you going to do this soon?*, you can say *Do you plan to do this soon?* Not the same, but close enough.

If necessary, use more than one term to suit various types of reader. Native speakers will probably understand *split up with* to describe the end of a relationship, but newcomers to English will need the more formal *separation* or *divorce*.

Use repetition—don't try variations to be 'interesting'. A car is a car and doesn't have to be a vehicle. Some people will fail to read *vehicle*, and others will assume you mean different things.

Use concrete language for readers who don't grasp abstract ideas easily, which is usual among PCIs. So *Use a condom when you have sex* is clearer than *Practise safe sex*.

Don't use contractions. They look friendly but are harder to read. This is important for both readers with English as a second language and PCIs. Write *do not*, not *don't*. Do write *OK*—it's almost always understood.

Avoid metaphors. To say something is *a piece of cake* will have newcomers to English expecting cake. Sports-related sayings may not be understood by non-sports enthusiasts, so *level playing fields*, *sticky wickets*, and *end runs* need translation. Other sayings are too old-fashioned, such as *all grist to the mill*, *pig in a poke*, and *it went like clockwork*.

Use hyphens freely to break a word into chunks. Instead of *coworker*, say *co-worker* (not *colleague*); *by-law* not *bylaw*; *web-site* not *website*; *day-care* not *daycare*; *home-owner* not *homeowner*; *co-ordinate* not *coordinate*; and *health-care* not *healthcare*. But never split a word over two lines with a hyphen—it's more difficult to read. Turn off your line-end hyphenation.



Slower readers may be able to sound out words with a clear shape—words like *Birmingham* or *difficult*. Words like *that*, *there*, and *then* look similar, though. Words with alternative sound changes (such as the *t* in *position*, or the *s* in *sure*) often cause trouble. Words that look similar, like *change*, *charge*, and *chance* can be hard for PCIs.

Numbers: figures or words?

It's easier to read 8 than eight, so maybe ignore conventions about spelling out numbers under ten or twenty-one. The only exception is 1, as it's easily confused with *I*. But when using numbers over 999, spell them out in words. A lengthy row of numerals is hard to work out, especially if it has many zeros. Unless exact numbers are necessary, round a large figure up or down into something easier to read. Say *four million* rather than *three million eight hundred and fifty thousand*.

Dates are more easily read as words plus numbers. For example, *11 November 2008* not *11/11/08*. And don't contract the month to *Nov*.

For PCIs, percentages rarely work. Instead of 50% use *one half*. Use *one-quarter* or *three-quarters* instead of 25% and 75%. Beyond that, just say *many*, *most*, *a few*, *hardly any*. It's not as accurate but it's better than leaving your reader behind. Don't use graphs, but a simple, clearly labelled, and brightly coloured pie chart is OK. Both graphs and percentages are all right for educated newcomers to English.

Accuracy: gains and losses

Critics may say you'll lose accuracy. At times, this is true. The rewriting process often exposes obscurity, but some detail will have to go. Ask PCIs about *rights* (as in *human rights*) and they'll usually first think of rights and lefts, or rights and wrongs. *Human rights* may need to become *What is fair*, which is by no means a legal definition (or even accurate), but the idea is easier to grasp.

In many cases, however, you'll improve accuracy. The best part of writing low-literacy material is that it forces you to be utterly lucid. Abstraction and euphemism are out. If you're struggling with fuzzy text that's hard to paraphrase, call the original writer and ask for

clarification: it's not always your job to interpret the uninterpretable. In one situation, a clarified consent form for a school outing became unusable when staff realized it was so biased towards the school that no parent would (or should) have signed it.

Comprehension is the main thing, not whether it passes a lawyer's or grammarian's test of precision.

### Proofread carefully

Check and recheck the writing, as people with low literacy can often blame themselves for misunderstanding if a typo makes the text confusing.

### Type size and style

Use a good-sized font. In a typeface such as Times Roman or Arial, that will normally be 13- or 14-point. Sixteen is too big (except for those with vision loss), while 12-point is often too small. While the usual advice is to use a serif typeface (see chapter 30), try sans serif for people who read slowly, especially for those who read word by word. The lack of serifs makes the words clearer. But if there's a lot of text, Arial can seem heavy, so a modified sans serif such as Optima is a good alternative. Avoid Comic Sans as its informality can undermine serious text, and people soon find it irritating.

### Adding a contents page and summary to longer documents

Add a contents page to text of more than a few pages, as these readers can seldom skim-read a long document. Sometimes just a summary of main points at the start will be enough for basic readers. Or use parallel text, in which the full version is in a column headed 'Full text', and a short one-sentence summary of each paragraph is beside it in a column headed 'Short text'.

### Examples: transforming text into low-literacy English

**Original:** If the State agency finds that an individual has received a payment to which the individual was not entitled, whether or not

the payment was due to the individual's fault or misrepresentation, the individual shall be liable to repay the State the total sum of the payment to which the individual was not entitled.

**New:** If the State agency finds that it gave you money you were not meant to have, you must pay it all back.

**Original** (leaflet about adolescents with cognitive impairments): We empower youth to make the necessary choices to effect a positive transition to adulthood.

**New:** We support young people to make useful choices.

**Original** (booklet about choices in pregnancy): Whether or not you seek the support of others at this time, remember that *you* are the only person who can make the final decision about what to do, and your decision must be voluntary. No one has the right to try to pressure or force you into parenthood, adoption, or abortion against your wishes.

**New:** Remember, *you* are the only person who should pick what is best for you. You can ask people to tell you what they think. But no one should try to make you do something that does not feel OK for you, no matter how much they love you or how much you think they know. [Above two examples by permission of Calgary Sexual Health Centre]

**Original** (a medical consent form): I, the undersigned, have had the above procedure(s) explained to me by Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ and understand the nature and consequences of it (them), including any alternative/additional procedure(s). Further, I understand that during the course of the procedure(s), unforeseen conditions may necessitate alternative procedure(s).

Let's explore this example:

- To avoid confusion, the form needs splitting. One part would be for people having invasive procedures such as surgery; the second would be for those having tests. Then, for accuracy, *procedure* could be altered to *surgery* or *test*.
- The plurals *s* and *them* in brackets are hard to understand, as is the slash between *alternative* and *additional*.

- *the undersigned* can be removed and a space left for the person's name.
- The passive voice can become active: *Dr X has explained to me* or *I have learned about the surgery Dr X will do*.
- *unforeseen conditions* becomes *something may happen that was not in the plan*.
- *necessitate alternative procedures* becomes *Dr X may then need to do something different*.

## Pictures and gestures

Where feasible, pictures can help people read the words. Colour pictures are better than black and white, which are themselves better than nothing. Pictures also break up the text and make it look more inviting.

However, people interpret pictures differently according to their life experiences and background. So clear representational pictures work best, even if fluent readers find them dull. Don't remove facial features. Don't put in fussy backgrounds or irrelevant details. Explain any symbols: a crossed-through red circle is meaningless until people have learned to 'read' it.

Don't use cutesy or childish pictures as they can offend in a way that plain words don't. Try to find pictures that represent and include the readership. People with low literacy are more likely to be cleaners than airline pilots. They may be on meagre incomes, so holidays are more likely to mean a local seaside resort than skiing.

Try to show diversity if the pictures are for newcomers to English, but don't use those that label people just by their national clothing (unless, of course, the materials are meant only for a particular group and occasion), as it marks the readers as 'other' and quaint. Include real variety—not just one shade of black or brown to represent all. Avoid displaying gestures like the thumbs up that are offensive or cause derision in other cultures.

## Effects of plain English

It's hard to prove exactly how useful low-literacy plain English is for PCIs. This would involve not only watching for changes in behaviour,

## Can any of my rights be interfered with?



**Yes.** Most of the rights in the Human Rights Act have limits. This is to stop them unfairly damaging the rights of **other** people.

Everyone has rights. Your rights are important. But so are everyone else's. We all have to accept limits on our rights to make sure **other people** are treated fairly.

***Your right to freedom might have to be limited if you have broken the law. Also your right to free speech cannot mean the freedom to shout 'Fire!' in a crowded hall, when there isn't one.***

## Your rights



There are **16** rights in the Human Rights Act. Each one is called an **Article**. They are all taken from the European Convention on Human Rights. They affect big issues. Things to do with life and death.

Freedom from being tortured or killed. They are also about your rights in everyday life. What you can say and do. Your beliefs.

This page is from *A Guide to the Human Rights Act—a booklet for people with learning disabilities* published by the UK Ministry of Justice. It shows several common features of 'easy read' publications: headings; large print; illustrations; bold type for emphasis; moderate line length; a break-out box for special information; very short sentences; and, generally, simple words. The booklet's front cover is shown on the next page. [Reproduced at reduced size. Crown copyright, 2008.]



# A Guide to the Human Rights Act

A booklet for People with Learning Disabilities



Ministry of  
**JUSTICE**

Illustrations by CHANGE  
Picture Bank



but taking into account further variables like poor memory, physical disabilities, interest, and opportunities. For newcomers to English, again it's difficult to measure effectiveness, as their literacy skills improve all the time. As for people living on the edge of society or undergoing a personal crisis, it's unkind to be performing controlled studies with them.

### Getting professional help

Writing for low-literacy readers is harder than writing for average readers. Hiring an author can be expensive and difficult. So you may have to learn to do it yourself.

### Web writing

Low-literacy users are less able to scan webpages for meaning. They tend to plough on, word for word, and may miss peripheral page elements because they are focusing more narrowly. They often spend time puzzling over difficult words. Jakob Nielsen (2005) found they tend to accept their conclusions as 'good enough' based on scant information because digging deeper demands too much work. 'As soon as text becomes too dense, lower-literacy users start skipping, usually looking for the next link. In doing so, they often overlook important information' (<<http://nngroup.com/articles/writing-for-lower-literacy-users/>>).

Put your main point at the top of the page, where even readers who may give up after a few lines will see it. And, as with pages for more able readers, put other important information high up, to minimize the risk of users losing their place as they scroll.

Static text is easier to read, so avoid text that moves or changes, such as animations and fly-out menus. Avoid fussy additions around the edges of the screen (like advertisements). And if buttons are used to direct readers to other sites, make sure they're big enough to be easy for people with poor hand-eye coordination.

**Janet Pringle, an expert on preparing low-literacy documents in Canada, says:**

It is as important for readers with literacy barriers to be able to take part fully in society as it is for people who are blind or use a wheelchair. In my ideal world, two aspects would be different. There would be fewer literacy barriers. And someone would be able to say 'Please be more clear. I have difficulty reading' just as easily as someone else would say 'Speak up. I'm hard of hearing.' Hard-to-understand documents can mean the writer needs to try again, not that the readers are failures. (*Writing Matters: Getting Your Message Across* (2006) <<http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/writmatt/cover.htm>>)



# 30

## Clarifying page layout: some basics

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**GUIDELINE** *Use clear layout to display your words well.*

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Plain English needs effective layout; otherwise, only half the job is done. At its simplest, in a letter or short report, this might mean using easily legible type and putting ample space between paragraphs. At its most complex—in instructions, detailed forms, or webpages—effective layout might require the manipulation of such variables as typefaces, different-size headings, colours, and illustrations. And since so many people access websites through smartphones or tablets, webpages need to be optimized for use on these devices.

In the 1990s, layout was largely outside writers' knowledge and control. Typesetting and page make-up were expensive mysteries guarded by layout professionals. Now, with the advent of desktop publishing (DTP) and Web-design software, many writers have access to clever layout tools. But if these are not used with reasonable skill, if there is no sense of what makes a page look good, or if readers' strategies for tackling a document are ignored, then the results can be dire—poor layout can negate some of the benefits of plain English.

There's no simple checklist, but this chapter summarizes key points you may like to bear in mind when preparing a layout or getting others to do so. Naturally, for important or high-use documents, you may need to employ layout specialists who have undergone rigorous typographical training or have expertise in Web design. For simplicity, I've set out the points in question-and-answer style.

What's the best way to get a feel for good layout?

Study layout critically—books, reports, letters, webpages, forms, and your car- and life-insurance policies. Every line of type on every page or website, every ruled line, and every white space is the result of someone's conscious layout decisions, for good or ill. The sum of these decisions is what makes a page distinctive. And by going through the document yourself—say by filling in a form—you can see whether it is usable as well as legible.

Consider which pages are easy on the eye, and why. Which organize the material well, and how do they do this? Economy is often an important factor, so if many words have been squeezed into a page, what has been done (or not done) to make the result easily legible?

Consider how different layouts fulfil different purposes—to attract attention, to sell, to summarize main points, to ask questions, to act as reference material, to target a particular readership. A document has a typographic voice just as it has a writing voice. The overall voice establishes a mood and persuades people to regard the document as, e.g., formal/informal, friendly/serious/brash, relaxed/energetic, factual/lighthearted. It also helps the document to position itself in the marketplace. The ratio of images to text is likely to play a big part in whether people will pick up a document and read it. Anything that looks as if it will be a long, hard, dull read will put people off unless the text is particularly tasty. The success of the Harry Potter books, which lack illustration, shows that an exciting narrative alone can still gain a big audience. There's more on the effect of typographic voice in a paper by Jeanne-Louise Moys for the Simplification Centre, 'Typographic voice: researching readers' interpretations' (2011).

In paper documents, what's a good page size to use?

This depends on many things, such as the amount of information, how readers will use the document (will they need, for instance, to carry it around with them on a building site or to follow a route?), whether

it's to be stored and filed, or whether it needs to be fed through photocopiers or laser printers.

In Europe the commonest range of sizes—and therefore the most economical—are in the 'A' series, such as A3 (297 × 420 mm), A4 (210 × 297 mm), and A5 (148 × 210 mm). Each of these is formed by folding in half, along the long edge, the next biggest 'A' size. All the sizes offer an infinite number of layout possibilities. Most business letterheadings are A4, and a single column of type is the obvious layout choice. But an information leaflet might have two columns to the A4 page and be double-sided; this allows a great number of words to be fitted in. An A4 page could be divided into one narrow column (perhaps for side-headings) and one wide column for the associated main text. Many leaflets are A4 folded twice on the long edge, producing a six-panel setup—one panel for a front cover, perhaps, and five for other information.

The 'B' sizes offer other possibilities, especially if you want to create a distinctive look. B4 is 250 × 353 mm, B5 is 176 × 250 mm, and B6 is 125 × 176 mm.

In the US, common sheet sizes are 25 × 38 in., 26 × 40 in., and 36 × 48 in., from which the sizes for booklets, leaflets, etc. can be derived. Common sizes for trimmed stationery are 8.5 × 11 in., 8.5 × 14 in. (US legal), and 7.5 × 10 in.

What are the key variables to control for high legibility?

Three important variables are type size, column width, and space between lines ('leading', pronounced 'ledding'). These interact in ways that improve or impair legibility. While it's pointless to give rules on how these variables should be manipulated, some guidelines may help.

**Type size** Type size can be measured in points from just above the top of the capitals to just below the bottom of letters like y and j ('descenders') using a ruler called a type scale. One point (pt) is about 1/72 in.

In many typefaces the sizes 9-pt and above will be highly legible for large areas of continuous text on paper, though this will depend on how the other variables are handled. On webpages, a bigger size will be needed (see chapter 27).

Point size alone is an uncertain guide to how big the type appears to be. Here are examples of 10-pt type in two typefaces, Monotype Bembo and Monotype Nimrod ('typeface' means a set of lettering in a certain design):

Example of 10-pt Monotype Bembo, a widely available typeface based on a fifteenth-century Italian type.

Example of 10-pt Monotype Nimrod, designed in the 1970s for newspaper text setting.

Though both are 10-pt, the characteristics of Nimrod make it appear bigger than Bembo. This is mainly because in Nimrod the x-height (height of the lower-case *x*, *o*, *m*, *n*, etc.) is great in proportion to the type size. So x-height is a better guide to legibility than point size. Provided the x-height is 1.5 mm (3/50 in.) or more, printed type will be highly legible to those with normal eyesight under good reading conditions. For a mass audience, though, 1.8 mm (7/100 in.) is more reasonable. In a reference document you might be content to use a small point size, say 7-pt, for the sake of economy—but you'd choose a typeface whose x-height was large enough to make the point size reasonably legible and you'd use narrow columns. Documents to be read from a distance—posters or signs, say—will need a bigger type size. In the UK, the size of type on publicly maintained road and parking signs is laid down by the *Traffic Signs Manual*, a Department for Transport document available on the Web. In the US, the Federal Highway Administration's *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* does a similar job, supplemented in some states by local standards.

The British public sector tends to slavishly follow the standards set out in *Creating clear print and large print documents* (Goo3), UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF) (2012). This bans

italics and recommends a minimum 2 mm (8/100 in.) x-height for all text in all documents, including tables and footnotes. As only about 1–2% of the working-age population needs such big print, this seems a rather costly alternative to making large-print documents available on demand. It also makes tables, flow charts, and maps hard to design—and, for most people, hard to use. The issue is well debated in a Simplification Centre paper by Rob Waller, ‘The Clear Print standard: arguments for a flexible approach’ (2011), which comments on a forerunner of the UKAAF guidance that was published by the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

If many of the audience are known to have poor eyesight, an x-height of at least 3 mm (1/10 in.) will help, so it’s good to offer documents in this size for those who want them. See also chapter 27 for advice on websafe fonts and how to make webpages accessible to visually impaired people.

**Column width** For large areas of text on paper, most layout professionals reckon the optimum column width is 50–70 letters and spaces. This means about 8 to 12 words per line, as in the column width you’re reading now. In research with a sample of 4,000 people, Colin Wheildon found that 38 per cent thought text was hard to read if the lines extended beyond 60 characters.

Certainly a common mistake is to set small type across too wide a column, such as 170 mm on an A4 page. The result could be more than a hundred letters and spaces to the line unless the type is correspondingly big. And if the type is big, there’ll be fewer words to the page so printing or copying costs could increase.

**Leading** Normally there needs to be some leading; otherwise, readers tire easily and make mistakes when locating the start of lines. The amount of leading depends on the trade-off you make between economy and legibility. As a guide, try to ensure the leading is about a fifth of the type size. So 12-pt type might have 2.5- or 3-pt leading. Generally, the wider the column, the more leading is needed. Typefaces with a large x-height relative to their type size (like most versions of Times, Helvetica, Arial, Plantin, and Palatino) tend to need the full

allowance of leading; those with a smaller x-height (like Futura, Bodoni, and Bembo) tend to need less.

So which is the best typeface to use for high legibility?

What works well in one set of circumstances may not work well in another. Generally, the type for printed body text should be quiet, simple, and regular in form without quirks and oddities. For booklets longer than, say, twelve pages, it's usually better to choose a serif type—that is, a type with tiny strokes or projections at the end of most of the letters. Serifs guide the eye horizontally and their thick and thin strokes put light and shade on the page. Serif types tend to look rather more authoritative, classical, and official. The main text type in this book is a serif, Arno Pro.

Highly legible serif types include Plantin, Garamond, Joanna, Palatino, and Times. These are their industry names; trade names may differ for commercial or copyright reasons. Samples of fonts are easy to find on the Web (e.g. <<https://www.linotype.com>>), and your computer may have many fonts you can examine too.

Times is widely available, but its narrow character width tends to make it more suitable for newspaper columns. Its universality makes it a poor choice for layout professionals who want to create an individual look for their client's documents. In short, it's a bit boring.

The sans-serif types (types without serifs) tend to be more useful as headings and in forms, catalogues, and flyers, though they can look good in almost any application if handled well. They have enjoyed a resurgence on websites as they seem easy to read on screen. Sans faces tend to be plain, unfussy, and very compact, so in bold weights they can make a strong impact. Good sans faces include Helvetica, Gill, Franklin Gothic, and Frutiger. Arial, which to the layperson is similar to Helvetica, is universally available. The popular font Comic Sans is so despised by professional typographers that it has its own hate page on Facebook. Helvetica is much loved by purists for its clarity and simplicity, and has even had a feature-length documentary film made about it—*Helvetica* (2007), directed by Gary Hustwit.

Many documents combine sans-serif type for headings with serif type for body text. The opposite combination is less common but can still work well.

How should type be used to emphasize words?

Most typefaces can be used in weights such as roman (this weight), **bold**, *italic*, and ***bold italic***. A popular type like Helvetica has as many as 28 weights. In a single document, it's usually better to use as few weights as are really necessary and to make sure there is ample difference in strength between them. In some typefaces, especially sans faces, the italic weight is merely a sloping version of the roman and may not be noticeably different, especially on webpages.

Use highlighting weights sparingly—if you emphasize too much, nothing will be emphasized. If too many individual words are typed in bold, pages will look spotty or dazzling, distracting the reader. This is a common fault in insurance policies where defined terms like *we* and *you* tend to get bold type whenever they appear, with hideous results. But if you are writing a mailshot, you can use call-out boxes to make the text more tasty, and even an ordinary business letter can be enlivened by judicious use of bold type or italics.

Most people with normal eyesight dislike reading long swathes of bold, italics, and capitals. Of these, capitals tend to be the most disruptive to reading and may seem aggressive, though they are widespread in comic strips. There's no harm in capitalizing a few words, but the usual mix of upper and lower case is best for legibility. There's no need to set headings in capitals; generally they'll look better in sentence case (as in this book).

In typewriting, underlining was one of the few available ways of emphasizing text. The weight of line corresponded to the weight of the type and the effect was pleasant enough in small doses. In DTP, underlining is probably the least attractive way because the line will usually overprint the descenders unpleasantly, like that. So only do it if there's no other way.

Any hints on the use of white space?

Without wasting paper unnecessarily, you should allow generous margins and reasonable space between columns. Resist the temptation to fill white space with type. It's no tragedy if a report ends halfway down a page or the back of a leaflet is left blank.

If you're leaving space between paragraphs—a common alternative to indenting the first line—ensure the space adequately separates one paragraph from the next but don't let the paragraphs look like islands. The software will generally allow you to set up style sheets to exert fine control over inter-paragraph space.

If headings appear in a column of text, be sure to put at least as much space above them as below them; otherwise, they'll seem to be floating upwards to the previous paragraph.

If there are bullets, don't indent them excessively (or even at all), and don't unduly separate them from the text—5 mm is enough. Generally the space from the bullet to the type should be the same as or less than the space between lines.

Think about whether you really need to put a paragraph space between bullet-list items. On webpages especially, this can waste a lot of 'above-the-fold' space for no good reason.

Is it a good idea to reverse out the type?

Reversing out means printing the type in white out of a background colour. Usually this will only be highly legible if the type is at least 10-pt in a bold weight and if the background colour is dark. Sans-serif faces tend to reverse out better than serif. Only reverse out small areas of type.

Should type be printed on a coloured background?

Not if it destroys the clarity of the type. For most purposes, there needs to be strong contrast between foreground (the type) and



background. If you use dark-green type on a pale-green background, you're asking for trouble, especially as about 8 per cent of males are colour blind for green and red and may see these colours as grey. Placing type over graphics or photos will reduce its legibility significantly for people with impaired vision.

Is it a good idea to track or scale the type?

Tracking means adding or taking out space between letters. There comes a point when excessive tracking disrupts the readers so they start to look at individual letters instead of reading whole words and in sweeps of four or five words. If done at all, tracking needs to be sensitive and respect the typeface's design characteristics.

Similar points apply to the ability of some software to 'scale' the type, compressing or expanding it. Don't overdo this: be sensitive to the typeface design and to your readers' eyesight.

What does 'hierarchy of headings' mean?

A document may use several sizes or weights of heading to signify, for example, chapter headings, subheadings, and paragraph headings. This range of sizes or weights (or both) is the hierarchy of headings. In general, the strength and position of headings should reflect the job they are being asked to do. So chapter headings will usually be much stronger than subheadings, which will in turn be much stronger than paragraph headings. This is similar to the arrangement used in this book. The hierarchy of headings should be applied consistently—readers get confused if the same signal is used with different meanings. You want readers to see at a glance the hierarchy of information from the typographical cues you give.

Should I use justified type?

Justification means inserting spaces between words (and even between letters) so that all the lines of type take up the full column width. Hyphenation at line ends may also be needed to make this work. The main reasons for justification are economy and, according to some, a tidier look.

There's no clear-cut evidence that competent justification impairs the reading performance of literate adults. Sometimes, though, mechanical justification tends to produce rivers of white space running down the text as well as very uneven letter-spacing. If you dislike the justified type your machine produces, your software may offer help. For example, you should be able to make it apply line-end hyphenation only to words of seven letters or more, and prevent more than two successive line-end hyphenations.

Unjustified type ('ranged left' or 'flush left') tends to produce a more relaxed, informal look. Word-spacing remains constant. The hyphenation program can be switched off if you dislike line-end hyphenation, though the drawback is a more ragged right-hand edge to the column. With unjustified type, you'll want to avoid breaking up the left-hand edge of the column by excessive indentation. Try to use the left-hand edge as the starting point for most text.

By editing or other adjustments, try to remove widows (single words forming the last line of a paragraph), especially if they appear as the first line of a page. They waste space and look unsightly.

### Does colour help?

Cost may prohibit the use of a second colour (or several colours) on anything except preprinted stationery, external publications with long print runs, and websites. But if colours are available, don't spatter them throughout the text. Use them mainly to help people navigate through the document, perhaps by applying the same colour to all headings or to one level of heading. Use colour also to add impact, say, on a front cover. In forms, a second colour is now common (perhaps as a percentage tint) to surround white completion boxes; this helps them stand out.

### What paper should I use?

This depends on your budget and the conditions under which the document will be used. If possible, take advice from a print professional. Heavy gloss papers tend to be expensive and may make the type hard to read in bright light. Thin papers create an unacceptable

amount of show-through when printed on both sides. Certain weights and finishes are treated unkindly by photocopiers and laser printers. Papers with a high recycled waste content have improved in quality and in their range of weights, finishes, and colours.

Doesn't decent layout cost more?

The work has to be done, so it might as well be done properly. A poorly laid-out form, for example, may substantially impair readers' performance and this adds to administrative costs if it has to be returned for recompletion. Government departments reckon that the cost of laying out and printing a paper form is as little as half of one per cent of the cost of administering it after completion. A life insurance policy might cost a few pence to print, but the first year's premiums could easily be several thousand times that. So good layout is unlikely to add significantly to costs. In the UK, the law requires good legibility in standard-form consumer contracts (see 'Starting points'), so tiny print strung across a wide column (say the full width of an A4 page) is unlikely to comply. However, as there's little appetite for enforcement, poor practice is rarely stopped.

To showcase most kinds of essential information, nothing more than decent layout competence is needed. Often the best results come from quiet, unshowy pages that the readers hardly notice—there's no need to shout. Colin Wheildon says, 'Typography must be clear. At its best, it is virtually invisible.'

The rest of the chapter shows the layout features of pages from several documents. All are given at much reduced size and in a single colour. Many of the documents from which these pages are taken display the Clear English Standard from Plain Language Commission.



# 2

## Other useful contacts

### **Abandoned vehicles**

020 8379 1000

### **Age Concern (Enfield)**

020 8351 1322

### **Animal welfare**

020 8379 3695

### **Anti-social behaviour (ASB)**

freephone 0800 40 80 160

### **ASB out of hours**

020 8379 1000

### **Asbestos advice**

020 8379 3661

### **Care & Repair**

020 8379 1000

### **Childline**

freephone 0800 1111

### **Citizens Advice Bureau**

0870 126 4664

### **Community Alarm**

020 8367 3521

### **Community Safety Unit**

020 8379 4612

### **Crimestoppers**

freephone 0800 555 111

### **Domestic violence helpline**

0808 2000 247

### **Elder abuse (safeguarding adults)**

020 8379 8052

### **Enfield Racial Equality Council**

020 8373 6271/2

### **Environmental Health**

020 8379 1000

### **Federation of Enfield Community Associations Ltd (FECA)**

020 8245 3593

### **Gas leaks**

freephone 0800 111 999

### **Hate Crime Forum**

020 8379 4612

### **Housing assessments**

020 8379 4377

### **Housing/council tax benefit**

020 8379 3798

### **Legal advice**

020 8807 8888

### **Local police**

020 8807 1212

### **National Debtline**

0808 808 4000

### **NHS Direct**

0845 4647

### **Noise nuisance**

020 8379 1000

### **Pests**

020 8379 1000

### **Recycling**

020 8379 1000

### **Refuse collection**

020 8379 1000

### **Street lighting (David Websters)**

freephone 0800 032 6788

### **Thames Water (water leaks)**

freephone 0800 714 614

### **Three Valleys Water (water leaks)**

freephone 0800 376 5325

### **Victim Support**

0845 30 30 900

A contacts list needs to be easy to scan so readers can find the name they want. Good layout can help, as shown here in a page from Enfield Homes' tenants handbook. The names are in alphabetical order and bold type, while the phone numbers are in roman type. There's space between all the items, too. It looks so simple that someone must have spent quite some time thinking it out. Arguably, 'Local police' would be easier to find as 'Police—local'. (Design by the Bridge Group. By permission of Enfield Homes.)

HOUSING BENEFIT AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT

## Help with child-care costs



**5**  
Number 5 in a series of benefit information leaflets.

St Albans

## Help with child-care costs

**Claims for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit include help for parents with child-care costs. The cost of child care, up to the limits shown in this leaflet, may be taken off your earnings, working tax credit or child tax credit when we calculate your overall benefit. This may increase the total benefit that you are entitled to.**

*This leaflet is part of a series (Information questions produced by a group of local authorities to help make Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit easier to understand)*

- 1 How to claim benefits
- 2 Backdating your benefit claim
- 3 Change of circumstances
- 4 Non-dependants
- 5 Help with child-care costs
- 6 Self-employed benefit claims
- 7 Student benefit claims
- 8 Overpayment of benefits
- 9 Entitled benefit payments
- 10 Discretionary housing payments
- 11 Benefits on two incomes
- 12 Temporary absence from your home
- 13 Home visits
- 14 Discussing your benefit claim with other people
- 15 How to appeal

## Who can claim child-care costs?

**Single parents can claim if:**

- you work 16 hours or more a week; or
- you are on maternity leave and receiving Statutory Maternity Pay or Maternity Allowance.

**Couples can claim if:**

- both of you work 16 hours or more a week; or
- one of you works 16 hours or more a week and the other is disabled or blind and receiving other benefits; or
- one of you works 16 hours or more a week and the other is on maternity leave and receiving Statutory Maternity Pay or Maternity Allowance.

## What child-care costs qualify?

The child must be under 15 years old, or under 16 if they are disabled.

**Their care must be provided by one of the following:**

- a registered child-minder;
- a registered nursery or play scheme;
- an out-of-hours scheme run by an approved provider. The out-of-hours scheme will be able to tell you whether or not they are approved;
- an out-of-hours club or scheme provided by a school on school premises or by a local authority. This usually only applies if the child is aged 8 or over;
- a child-care scheme on Crown property (property owned by Her Majesty or a government department) where registration is not required.

- an organisation accredited by the Secretary of State under the Tax Credit regulations.

We will need proof of the child-care payments you make and a copy of the child-minder's registration certificate.

## How much can be allowed?

**The maximum costs for child-care that can be allowed are:**

- £175 a week for one child;
- £300 a week for two or more children.

## How and when should I claim?

If you have not already made a claim for child-care costs on the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claim form, and you think you may qualify, you should contact us at the Benefits Office as soon as possible.

If you have not claimed benefits, but feel you may qualify because of your child-care costs, contact us as soon as possible.

Our address and contact details are on the back page of this leaflet.

## Other formats

This leaflet is also available in large print, Braille, on audio cassette and in other languages. Please contact us if you need this leaflet in one of these formats.

**This leaflet gives basic advice and is a general guide. If you have a question that is not answered in this leaflet, or if you want more advice, please contact us.**

*Participating authorities: Bedfordshire, Devonshire, Dorset, Dorset, Lincoln City, North Hants, St Albans, Somerset, South Bucks and Wiltshire (leaflet)*



St Albans

## Where to get help and advice

To get more information you can visit us at:

**St Albans District Council**  
District Council Offices, Civic Centre  
St Albans, Herts AL1 3BE

Offices are open: Mon to Thu 8.45am – 5pm  
Fri 8.45am – 4.30pm

Telephone: 01753 866100  
Text telephone: 01753 819570  
Email: benefits@stalbans.gov.uk  
Fax: 01753 819667  
Website: www.stalbans.gov.uk

**Other organisations that provide help and advice**

**Citizens Advice Bureau**  
84 London Road, St Albans, Herts AL1 1NG  
Telephone: 01753 855269

**Citizens Advice Bureau**  
Pine Road, Harpenden Town Hall  
Lepton Road, Harpenden, Herts AL5 2LX  
Telephone: 01462 749787

**Shelter Housing**  
Queensway House  
Queensway, Harpenden, Herts AL5 0JW  
Telephone: 01767 256256

St Albans

One of a series of fifteen leaflets on welfare benefits, this adopts a clear hierarchy of headings and makes good use of bold and italic type. Note the use of the bottom left of page 2 (top row, centre), often a graveyard area, for reference information (the contents list). The six-page 1/3 A4 gatefold layout makes economical use of an A4 sheet and gives a good column width (about 48 characters). Bespoke themed illustrations (full colour in the original) add a touch of class and link all the leaflets graphically. The cost of this kind of high-quality design work was spread among ten local councils, with pages 1 and 6 carrying details unique to each council. (Design by M & I M Frost. By permission of St Albans District Council.)

## And everyone



### **YHA accommodation is open to all. People of all ages are able to stay with YHA, to enjoy the great locations and the friendly relaxed atmosphere of our accommodation.**

Even though you no longer have to be a member to stay in our hostels, the number of people joining YHA increased in the last year by 10,000, reversing a trend from recent years.

Two million families in the UK cannot afford a week's holiday. YHA's affordable accommodation is an attractive option for many. The number of families staying with YHA increased by almost 18% in the last year.

Families enjoy the opportunity of getting out to new places, in the countryside and in cities. The social mix YHA offers is great for families. Children have an opportunity of making new friends, giving their parents a chance to relax.

Some accommodation is particularly suited to families. YHA Hartington has a children's play area and a small pets corner.

Families are able to take part in activities at YHA Edale in the Peak District and Okehampton in Devon. At YHA Treyamon, Cornwall, and YHA Broad Haven, Pembrokeshire, families can enjoy coastal activities together.

The Mosaic Partnership is a project designed to increase participation of people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in four National Parks (Peak District, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales and Brecon Beacons) and YHA.

Our involvement with Mosaic proves our commitment to improving BME community access to the National Parks and the wider rural environment. Staff at YHA sites that have hosted Mosaic groups benefit from interaction with new users. BME groups are now independently using our hostels. This

raises our figures for overnight stays, and our involvement in the scheme can give us access to funders who want to know more about our commitment to community cohesion.

### **Case study**

"The atmosphere (was) relaxed and security tight enough to enable mums and dads to relax and let their children use the games room and mix with other kids. Our boys... were never short of playmates during our half-term trip".

Dale Williams,  
Birmingham Mail

12 Annual Review 2008

Annual reports don't have to be dull. The 32-page booklet from YHA (England and Wales) uses 89 colour photos to show the changing nature of youth hostelling, with emphasis on fun and outdoor adventure. The layout uses three columns to the A4 page. Few pages have more than 500 words of text. It makes for a bright, entertaining document that's clearly written and easy on the eye. (By permission of YHA (England & Wales) Ltd.)

**This Enquire guide explains what a law about getting help at school could mean for you. It's for you even if you don't get extra help just now, because anyone can have additional support needs at some point.**

Everyone is good at different things. Needing extra help with something does not mean you are stupid.

call 0845 123 2303



**So what does it mean?**

Basically, if you need extra help to be able to get the most from school for any reason at all, then you have additional support needs and your school must help you.




**You may need help for the whole time you're at school or you may only need it for a little while (maybe a few weeks or months).**

2 log on to [www.enquire.org.uk](http://www.enquire.org.uk)

These pages from a guide for secondary-school pupils use simple language and eye-catching graphics. The background of the original pages is a pale, matt colour to comply with guidelines for visually impaired youngsters. The text is consistently left-aligned to help those using magnifiers. (By permission of Enquire (Children in Scotland).)

**YorkshireWater**

Date **2 January 2009**  
Page 1 of 2

EE0099/000000 567  
Mr John Sample & Mrs Kathryn Sample  
54 Sample Lane  
St Albans  
Hertfordshire  
AA0 0AA

**Supply address:** 7 Sample Court, Sample Town, North Yorkshire

**Annual statement  
for your direct debit account**

**The last 12 months**

Start balance on your last statement	<b>£ 38.22</b>
	(in credit)
<b>Total charges since your last statement see over for detail -&gt;</b>	<b>£ 97.45</b>
<b>Payments received</b>	<b>£ 216.00</b>
	(credit)
01 Feb 08 -£18.00	01 Aug 08 -£18.00
03 Mar 08 -£18.00	01 Sep 08 -£18.00
01 Apr 08 -£18.00	01 Oct 08 -£18.00
01 May 08 -£18.00	03 Nov 08 -£18.00
02 Jun 08 -£18.00	01 Dec 08 -£18.00
01 Jul 08 -£18.00	05 Jan 09 -£18.00
<b>Refunds/Adjustments</b>	
Refund by Direct Credit on 8 January 2009	<b>£ 156.77</b>
<b>Current balance</b>	<b>£ 0.00</b>
<b>The next 12 months</b>	
<b>Current balance</b>	<b>£ 0.00</b>
Our calculation of your charges over the next 12 months: 50 cubic metres	<b>£ 156.00</b>
<b>Projected total charges in 12 months time</b>	<b>£ 156.00</b>
<b>Next steps</b>	
Your first payment of £13.00 will be taken on 1 Feb 2009 followed by 11 monthly payments of £13.00 from 1 Mar 2009 until 1 Jan 2010.	
<b>Payments will be taken from the following account:</b>	
Account name: J R & K SAMPLE	
Account number: *****00	
Sort code: 11-22-33	

**yorkshirewater.com**  
**0845 1 24 24 24**  
8am-8pm Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm Saturday

PO Box 52, Bradford BD3 7YD

Auto-payment tel 0845 1 247 247

Fax 01274 372 800

Minicom 0845 1 24 24 23

Asian language 0845 1 24 24 21

Language/emergency 0800 573 553

Bogus caller checks 0800 1 38 78 78  
Call to check that a meter inspector is a genuine  
Yorkshire Water employee

Account number  
**5000 5000 000 0000 0**

**Why are we sending  
you this?**

Your payment plan has been renewed as a result of a recent contact. This statement includes a summary of your charges and payments over the last 12 months, with our projection for the next 12 months. The new payments are based on the amount of water we expect you to use. It is for information only and no action is required by you.

**If you are moving home  
please tell us:**

- the date you're moving
- your new address and whether you'll be responsible for water charges there
- the name and current address of anyone taking over the supply at your address and the moving in date, if you know

You can give us this information together with your final meter reading at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) or call **0845 1 247 247**. If you can't give us a final meter reading, we'll work it out based on the amount of water you normally use.

**New prices from 1 April**  
You'll find our new prices at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) from 1 March.

**Bills in different formats?**  
If you'd like your account statement in large print or Braille or as an audio version, please call **0800 1 38 78 78**.

Customers of utility companies want and like bills they can understand. So good layout and clear language are vital.

On the front of this Yorkshire Water bill, three strong headings in the black horizontal bars divide the charge details and enable readers to find what they need. At the first fold, a strong horizontal rule acts as an important divider and its weight is echoed in the three other rules in the right-hand column. Bold type is used effectively throughout the page for headings and emphasis—for example in the smaller type at the top right.



**Your charges in detail for meter 00000000  
based on our domestic tariff**

**01 Oct 2007 to 31 Dec 2007**

Latest meter reading	810 actual (24 Jan 2008)
Previous meter reading	801 estimated (31 Oct 2007)
<b>Water volume charge</b>	=9 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	109.20p x 9.00 = £ 9.83
<b>Sewerage volume charge</b>	9 cubic metres x 95% = 8.55 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	117.10p x 8.55 = £ 10.01
<b>Standing charge</b>	£6.46 water, £0.35 sewerage £ 6.81
<b>Surface water</b>	Not connected for surface water drainage £ 0.00
<b>Total for 01 Oct 2007 to 31 Dec 2007</b>	<b>£ 26.65</b>

**01 Jan 2008 to 31 Mar 2008**

Latest meter reading	814 actual (08 May 2008)
Previous meter reading	810 actual (24 Jan 2008)
<b>Water volume charge</b>	=4 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	109.20p x 2.00 = £ 2.18
Price per cubic metre =	115.90p x 2.00 = £ 2.32
<b>Sewerage volume charge</b>	4 cubic metres x 95% = 3.80 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	117.10p x 1.90 = £ 2.22
Price per cubic metre =	127.40p x 1.90 = £ 2.42
<b>Standing charge</b>	£6.46 water, £0.35 sewerage £ 6.81
<b>Surface water</b>	Not connected for surface water drainage £ 0.00
<b>Total for 01 Jan 2008 to 31 Mar 2008</b>	<b>£ 15.95</b>

**01 Apr 2008 to 30 Jun 2008**

Latest meter reading	824 estimated (25 Jul 2008)
Previous meter reading	814 actual (08 May 2008)
<b>Water volume charge</b>	=10 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	115.90p x 10.00 = £ 11.59
<b>Sewerage volume charge</b>	10 cubic metres x 95% = 9.50 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	127.40p x 9.50 = £ 12.10
<b>Standing charge</b>	£6.91 water, £0.38 sewerage £ 7.29
<b>Surface water</b>	Not connected for surface water drainage £ 0.00
<b>Total for 01 Apr 2008 to 30 Jun 2008</b>	<b>£ 30.98</b>

**01 Jul 2008 to 30 Sep 2008**

Latest meter reading	831 actual (14 Oct 2008)
Previous meter reading	824 estimated (25 Jul 2008)
<b>Water volume charge</b>	=7 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	115.90p x 7.00 = £ 8.11
<b>Sewerage volume charge</b>	7 cubic metres x 95% = 6.65 cubic metres
Price per cubic metre =	127.40p x 6.65 = £ 8.47
<b>Standing charge</b>	£6.91 water, £0.38 sewerage £ 7.29
<b>Surface water</b>	Not connected for surface water drainage £ 0.00
<b>Total for 01 Jul 2008 to 30 Sep 2008</b>	<b>£ 23.87</b>

**Total charges for the last 12 months £ 97.45**

**How much is a cubic metre?**

One cubic metre is 1,000 litres. This is about 300 kettles or 11 baths.

**Contact us anytime**

You can pay your bill, sign up for Direct debit or make changes to your account 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) or by calling our automated line on 0845 1 247 247.

**Direct Debit Guarantee**

This guarantee is offered by all banks and building societies that take part in the direct debit scheme. The efficiency and security of the scheme is monitored and protected by your own bank or building society. Further details are available on request. Our DD Identification code: 956664

**Unhappy with our service?**

If you have a problem with our service, please call 0845 1 24 24 24 and we'll do everything we can to help. You'll find information in your Customer Guide about how to make a complaint and about the Consumer Council for Water. You'll find the latest guide at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) or please call us for a copy.

**Surface water drainage**

If your home isn't connected for surface water drainage you may be entitled to a rebate on this part of your water charges. Rebates for other types of property will depend on the chargeable band. Your Customer Guide tells you more about this. You'll find the latest guide at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) or please call us for a copy.

**About your meter**

**Meter readings**

Our agent will read your meter. If you have questions about the reading please contact us. We charge for all water that passes through your meter, including water lost by leakage or wastage and so we recommend that you read your meter regularly to check how much water you use. You'll find tips on how to save water in the home and garden at [yorkshirewater.com/becool](http://yorkshirewater.com/becool).

**Estimated reading**

If we're over or under estimated your water usage, we'll correct the difference the next time we read your meter. If you'd like an amended statement now, please give us your own reading at [yorkshirewater.com](http://yorkshirewater.com) or call our automated line on 0845 1 247 247.

**Damage to the meter**

Anyone who interferes with a meter to stop it registering accurately is committing an offence. Please contact us before you carry out any work to your home that might affect your water supply.

**Meter testing**

If you think that your meter isn't working properly please call us on 0845 1 24 24 24 and we'll arrange to have it tested. We charge for this but will refund the charge if the test shows that your meter is inaccurate.



The bill's back page has layout features that reflect the front. Again there are strong horizontal bars carrying important headings. The rules within those sections, and the invisible vertical grid line that is never breached by text, enable the reader to see the structure at once and read across easily. The right-hand column, broken up by numerous subheads, is held together and separated from the charging information by a pale tint (light blue in the original), which echoes the tinted panel on the front page. A sans-serif type has been used as this tends to be cleaner, simpler, and more concise in a document where tables predominate and space is tight. (Design by Boag Associates. Reproduced by permission of Yorkshire Water.)

Miss A N Other  
29 Anyplace Road  
Exometown 12344

Your hospital number: 23434567  
Patient name: Miss A N Other  
Doctor: Dr K Peterson

## Your appointment at the Midtown Hospital

---

**11.00 on Thursday 21 September 2012  
at the Ear Nose and Throat Clinic**

---

We have made an appointment for you to see the specialist Mr Brian Davidson about your throat complaint.  
Your appointment is at 11 am. Please arrive at 10.45 am.

### What to bring with you

Please bring this appointment letter with you and any medicine you are taking.

### What to do when you arrive

Please see the receptionist at the reception desk for the ENT Clinic on the first floor of the Out-Patients Building.

### What to expect

The appointment will probably take about 20 minutes. The doctor will look in your mouth using a special instrument. You will not have to undress.

Yours sincerely

**Fiona McGavin**  
Appointments coordinator



Call 020 1234 2345  
if you need to change this  
appointment

### Where to go

Ear Nose and Throat Clinic,  
1st Floor  
Outpatients Building  
Midtown Hospital  
High Street  
Midtown 123456

### How to get there

There is travel information and a map on the back of this letter.

### Changing your appointment

If you need to change this appointment, phone us immediately on 020 7123 4567, and ask for extension number 1234. We can then offer someone else this appointment, and arrange another one for you.

It's obvious that a hospital appointment letter should be clearly written and well designed, giving people confidence they'll be well looked after and reflecting the high standards of treatment they should be given. Good examples are surprisingly rare, though. Above is what such a letter could look like. It's a model produced by the UK's Simplification Centre. As with many professionally designed A4 documents, it uses a wide column for the main information and a narrow column with smaller type for reference material. It gives the big news immediately in large type, and the two-column approach is emphasized by the strong horizontal rule across the main column. Notice the use of bold for headings but no extra space beneath them; instead, there's white space between sections. The text answers readers' typical questions such as 'Do I need to bring anything?' and 'What will happen?' And, to reduce wasteful no-shows, it explains how to change the appointment.



**BOROUGH OF  
MANTON**

Mr Andrew Sample  
12 Acacia Avenue  
Manton MN3 6XY

## Bus Lane Penalty Charge Notice

This is an important notice. Do not ignore it.  
You must either pay the penalty charge or  
challenge it by 05 September 2013.

This Penalty Charge Notice is issued under the Bus Lane Contraventions (Penalty  
Charges, Adjudication & Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2005

Notice date: 06 August 2013

Reference: MN1234567

### Your car was photographed in a bus lane

Date of photo 03 August 2013  
Time 12.33  
Vehicle ABS1HTY  
Place Station Approach  
Evidence Video (operator MN175)

You are entitled to view this. Write to  
us at the address below or phone us  
on 01234 000 0000.



### The penalty

**£30**  
if you pay by  
22 Aug 2013

**£60**  
if you pay by  
05 Sept 2013

**£90**  
if you pay later.

### How to challenge

If you wish to challenge, see the back of this form for instructions.  
You must contact us by 17.30 (5.30pm) on 05 September 2013.  
You will not have to pay the penalty while we consider your appeal.  
If we refuse your challenge we will give you a new date by which you will  
need to pay the penalty.

### How to pay

Notice date 06 August 2013  
Reference MN1234567

**By phone**  
Call 0845 1234567  
with your credit or  
debit card details.

**In person**  
You can pay by cash,  
cheque or card at the  
Civic Offices, Mon-Fri  
9.30-5.30, Sat 9.30-1.00.

**Online**  
[https://secure.  
manton.gov.uk/  
parking/](https://secure.manton.gov.uk/parking/)

Manton Borough Council  
PO Box 2323  
Worthing  
BN11 9XY

**By post**  
Send this slip with  
a cheque paid to  
Manton Borough  
Council, or enter your  
card details here. Send  
a stamped address  
envelope if you need  
a receipt.

Name on card

Card number

Start date

Expiry date

Issue number

Address

Signature of cardholder



This speculative redesign of a local council's penalty charge notice for a traffic offence is a world away from the mishmash of hideous wording and gruesome graphics found on so many notices of this kind. It avoids lengthy quotations from legislation and uses bold and strongly placed headings to tell the story—what the authority says happened, the penalty, and the choice of 'challenge' or 'pay'. Instead of referring to a payment deadline as '28 days from the service of this notice', it gives the actual date by which you should challenge or pay. And it gives three alternative amounts so you can see clearly your options. Notice how much of the information aligns with invisible vertical grid lines, which makes the page look well structured. (Design: Simplification Centre, UK.)

# Appendix 1

## COMMONEST WORDS

This appendix shows, in priority order by columns, the most commonly used nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in written and spoken English, according to data derived mainly from the British National Corpus of 100 million words. The website <<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/bncfreq/>> (Leech, G, Rayson, P, and Wilson, A (2001) *Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English* (London)) also shows the frequency with which the words are used. Frequency is not the same as understandability. But if most of the words in your writing are from these lists, you should find that most readers will be familiar with them.

### TOP 150 NOUNS

time	month	authority	girl
year	side	road	moment
people	business	minister	father
way	night	rate	age
man	eye	hour	value
day	home	door	force
thing	question	office	order
child	information	right	matter
Mr	power	war	act
government	change	mother	health
work	per cent	person	lot
life	interest	reason	decision
woman	development	view	street
system	money	term	patient
case	book	period	industry
part	water	centre	mind
group	other	society	class
number	form	figure	church
world	room	police	condition
house	level	city	paper
area	car	need	bank
company	council	million	century

problem	policy	community	section
service	market	kind	hundred
place	court	price	activity
hand	effect	control	table
party	result	process	death
school	idea	access	building
country	use	issue	sort
point	study	cost	sense
week	name	position	staff
member	job	course	team
end	body	minute	experience
state	report	education	student
word	line	type	Mrs
family	law	research	language
fact	face	subject	
head	friend	programme	

### TOP 300 VERBS

be	require	prove	record
have	continue	wear	depend
do	lose	argue	enable
will	add	catch	complete
say	fall	enjoy	cost
would	change	introduce	sound
can	remember	eat	check
get	remain	enter	laugh
make	buy	present	realise
go	speak	point	extend
see	stop	arrive	arise
know	send	ensure	notice
take	receive	plan	define
could	decide	pull	fit
think	win	refer	examine
come	understand	act	study
give	develop	relate	recognize
look	describe	affect	bear

may	agree	close	shake
should	open	manage	hang
use	reach	identify	sign
find	build	thank	attend
want	involve	compare	fly
tell	spend	obtain	gain
must	return	announce	perform
put	draw	note	result
mean	die	forget	travel
become	hope	indicate	protect
leave	create	wonder	adopt
work	walk	maintain	confirm
need	sell	suffer	let's
feel	wait	publish	stare
seem	shall	express	demand
might	cause	avoid	imagine
ask	pass	suppose	beat
show	lie	finish	attempt
try	accept	determine	[be] born
call	watch	tend	associate
provide	raise	save	marry
keep	base	listen	care
hold	apply	design	voice
turn	break	treat	collect
follow	learn	share	employ
begin	explain	control	issue
bring	increase	remove	release
like	cover	visit	mind
going	grow	throw	emerge
help	report	exist	mark
start	claim	encourage	deny
run	support	force	aim
write	cut	reflect	shoot
set	form	smile	appoint
move	stay	admit	supply
play	contain	assume	order
pay	reduce	replace	observe
hear	establish	prepare	reply
include	join	improve	drink

believe	wish	fill	strike
allow	seek	mention	settle
meet	achieve	fight	ring
lead	choose	miss	propose
live	deal	intend	ignore
stand	face	drop	link
happen	fail	push	press
carry	serve	hit	respond
talk	end	discover	survive
appear	occur	refuse	arrange
produce	kill	prevent	concentrate
sit	used [to]	regard	lift
offer	drive	teach	cross
consider	rise	lay	approach
suggest	discuss	reveal	test
expect	place	state	experience
read	love	operate	touch
let	pick	answer	charge

### TOP 150 ADJECTIVES

other	real	present	cold
good	black	royal	ready
new	particular	natural	green
old	international	individual	useful
great	special	nice	effective
high	difficult	French	western
small	certain	following	traditional
different	open	current	Scottish
large	whole	modern	German
local	white	labour	independent
social	free	legal	deep
important	short	happy	interesting
long	easy	final	considerable
young	strong	red	involved
national	European	normal	physical
British	central	serious	left

right	similar	previous	hot
early	human	total	existing
possible	true	prime	responsible
big	common	significant	complete
little	necessary	industrial	medical
political	single	sorry	blue
able	personal	dead	extra
late	hard	specific	past
general	private	appropriate	male
full	poor	top	interested
far	financial	Soviet	fair
low	wide	basic	essential
public	foreign	military	beautiful
available	simple	original	civil
bad	recent	successful	primary
main	concerned	aware	obvious
sure	American	hon.	future
clear	various	popular	environmental
major	close	heavy	positive
economic	fine	professional	senior
only	English	direct	
likely	wrong	dark	

### TOP 150 ADVERBS

so	away	clearly	otherwise
up	perhaps	at all	directly
then	right	more than	like
out	already	further	completely
now	yet	better	normally
only	later	before	best
just	almost	round	slowly
more	of course	forward	relatively
also	far	please	apparently
very	together	finally	early
well	probably	quickly	merely
how	today	recently	instead



down	actually	anyway	alone
back	ever	a bit	for instance
on	at least	suddenly	largely
there	enough	generally	possibly
still	less	nearly	nevertheless
even	for example	as well	carefully
too	therefore	obviously	hard
here	particularly	exactly	mainly
where	either	okay	currently
however	around	maybe	somewhere
over	rather	a little	along
in	else	immediately	entirely
as	sometimes	easily	previously
most	thus	though	tonight
again	ago	earlier	extremely
never	yesterday	through	fairly
why	home	up to	in particular
off	all	above	increasingly
really	usually	tomorrow	equally
always	indeed	highly	all right
about	certainly	eventually	surely
when	once	fully	ahead
quite	long	slightly	twice
much	simply	hardly	straight
both	especially	no longer	
often	soon	below	

## Appendix 2

### A SHORT HISTORY OF PLAIN-ENGLISH MOMENTS

Nobody knows who first called for ‘plain English’, but in the fourteenth century **Geoffrey Chaucer** (c.1343–1400) had his Host in the *Canterbury Tales* demand that the Clerk of Oxford put aside ‘youre terms, youre colours, and youre figures’ (technical terms, figures of speech, and rhetorical devices), and:

Speketh so pleyne at this time, we yow preye,  
That we may understonde what ye seye.

Around 1391, Chaucer also wrote what seems to be the earliest surviving technical manual in English. It explained how to operate the astrolabe, which enabled users to tell the time and predict the position of the stars. Though wordy by modern standards (and unfinished), it used simple language with plenty of active-voice verbs and imperatives (see chapters 6 and 26 in this book), and was split into sections with headings. Chaucer’s immediate audience was a 10-year-old, either his own son or that of a close friend, and he tells the boy that he’ll write it in easy grammar and vocabulary—‘full lighte reules and naked wordes’. So he was adjusting his style to the reader in a way we recognize as good practice today. In James E Morrison’s free translation, the manual declares:

This treatise is...written clearly and in plain English because your Latin is still not good enough, my little son...I ask every person who reads...this...to excuse my crude editing and my excessive use of words...[for] it is hard for a child to learn from complex sentences. (James E Morrison, ‘Chaucer’s Astrolabe Treatise’, [www.chirurgeon.org/files/Chaucer.pdf](http://www.chirurgeon.org/files/Chaucer.pdf)—includes Chaucer’s original text.)

With such ideas and inclinations, it seems fair to regard Chaucer as the originator of the plain-English movement.

When **William Tyndale** (c.1492–1536) secretly and dangerously translated the New Testament into English in 1525—only the Latin Vulgate Bible was allowed in English churches—he could have used an ornate, high-level style. Instead, he tended to prefer the more basic vocabulary of the common people of his day, as well as simple syntax and vigorous verbs. Like Chaucer, Tyndale seems to have been keen on the modern plain-English principle of keeping the readers in mind, if his challenge to a Gloucestershire priest is anything to go by: ‘If God spare my

life, I will cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the scripture than thou.' Betrayed by an English agent in the Low Countries, Tyndale was executed by the Holy Roman Empire in 1536. But after various Tudor monarchs had come and gone, King James I published a Bible in English in 1611 (the Authorized Version) whose New Testament is drawn 84 per cent word for word from Tyndale, according to Bryan Moynahan in *If God spare my life* (New York, 2002). It's Tyndale's unique voice that gives us such rhythmical and enduring phrases as *for ever and ever, salt of the earth, judge not that you be not judged, let there be light, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, in the beginning God created heaven and earth, apple of his eye, fight the good fight, and a man after his own heart*.

In 1550, after only three years on the English throne, **Edward VI** had become so exasperated with the law that he remarked:

I would wish that the superfluous and tedious statutes were brought into one sum together and made more plain and short, to the intent that men might better understand them. [David St. L Kelly *Legislative Drafting and Plain English* <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AdelLawRw/1986/6.pdf>>]

In the same century, some wanted to halt the influx of 'inkhorn terms' such as *ingent affabilitie, dominicall superioritie, and magnifical dexteritie*, which were meant to broaden what could be said in English and make it sound more grand. **Thomas Wilson** wrote: 'Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorne terms, but to speak as is commonly received... Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language.' (*Art of Rhetorique* (1553), quoted in the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford, 2018)) This plea was only partly successful and today's language is richer for such inkhorn terms as *defunct* and *inflate*—words that people find useful tend to survive.

In 1604 **Robert Cawdrey's** first-ever English-to-English dictionary sought to explain:

hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French. &c. With the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons.

Patronizing though this seems today, Cawdrey's 2,000-word dictionary was meant to help people whose lack of access to private tutors and grammar schools left them unable to understand the heavily Latinized English that was then so fashionable among the better-off.

From the seventeenth century, some Protestants, especially **Quakers**, tended to favour a simple style of writing and speaking that they called plain language.

The philosopher **Jeremy Bentham** (1748–1832) called for laws to be split into sections (this was happening in France, so it was unpopular at first) and demanded shorter sentences—one law included a 13-page sentence.

The English social reformer **George Coode** urged his fellow lawyers to write the law and legal documents more clearly. In *On legislative expression: or, the language of the written law* (1845), he said, rather too optimistically:

Nothing more is required than that instead of an accidental and incongruous style, the common popular structure of plain English be resorted to. [Coode's remarks are quoted by D C Elliott in 'Writing Rules: Structure and Style', an unpublished paper given to the International Conference on Legal Language, Aarhus School of Business, 1994.]

In nineteenth century England, others sought a kind of linguistic purity by trying to replace Latin-derived words with those of a Saxon look. **William Barnes**, for example, preferred *leechcraft* to *medicine*, *speechlore* to *grammar*, and *swanling* to *cygnet*. Some of his preferred terms—*foreword* (instead of *preface*) and *handbook* (instead of *manual*)—are today as popular as their alternatives.

In the US, the influential author **Mark Twain** (1835–1910), whose bestsellers included *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), gave advice about clear writing. He urged people to 'use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences' and declared that 'style—good style—[has] no barnacles on it in the way of unnecessary retarding words.' (S Crabbe 'Learning from Mark Twain', *Communicator*, winter 2012)

In England in the 1920s, **C K Ogden** and **I A Richards** devised Basic English. Its core was a vocabulary of 850 words which, in various combinations and using a narrow range of sentence structures, could, they believed, say everything that needed to be said. Their three aims were that Basic should be an international language, an introduction to full standard English for foreigners, and a kind of plain language for use in science, commerce, and government. In time, Basic was supported by Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, and Franklin Roosevelt, the US president. Though influential to this day in the teaching of English as a foreign language, Basic became bogged down in academic controversy and eventually fizzled out as a force for plain language in the 1950s. Its main legacy is the restricted vocabulary and grammar of ASD Simplified Technical English, which is widely used internationally in aerospace manuals.

On 9 August 1940, **Churchill** himself, who famously 'mobilized the English language and sent it into battle' found time amid the falling bombs to write a memo called 'Brevity' that told his civil servants he wanted shorter, clearer, jargon-free reports:

To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent looking for the essential

points... The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs... Let us not shrink from the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational... The saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking. [The full text is given in *The Plain English Story* by M Cutts and C Maher (Stockport 1986)]

In the late 1940s a landmark for plain English was erected when the British Treasury commissioned **Ernest Gowers**, a top civil servant, to write a book encouraging clear writing in the civil service and elsewhere. This eventually became *The Complete Plain Words*, still widely read in updated editions. Its motto 'Be short, be simple, be human' is powerful and easily remembered. Unfortunately the book exempted many forms of legal drafting from its advice, a loophole that some lawyers have used to justify their often wayward writing habits.

In 1948, **Rudolf Flesch** issued his **Reading-Ease Formula**, a seemingly objective measure of reading difficulty (see chapter 19), and followed this with *The Art of Readable Writing* in 1949. In 1975, the US Navy funded **Peter Kincaid** to simplify the Flesch formula to relate it to US grade levels because the military found that 30 per cent of new recruits read at below seventh grade (UK reading age 12). They used the new **Flesch-Kincaid Formula** to screen written materials and technical manuals so recruits could understand them. In 1980, **R P Kern** (US Army Institute) questioned the effectiveness of readability formulas and assessed them as counterproductive when used as a target for good writing.

**George Orwell**, author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, wrote a famous essay about clear writing in 1946, *Politics and the English Language* (easily found on the Web), in which he declared that the 'great enemy of clear language is insincerity'. It is mainly about political writing and literary criticism. Orwell says the former is 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. He offered six rules for writers, which 'one can rely on when instinct fails' (though his advice against passive-voice verbs is far too prescriptive, as mentioned in chapter 6):

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

## Recent times: the US

In the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s the seeds of a modern plain-English revolution were sown. Consumer groups used the mass media to publicize and ridicule examples of obscurity in legal documents and government forms, calling for plain language or plain English. In 1966, **John O'Hayre**, a government employee, wrote *Gobbledygook has gotta go*, a book that lambasted poor writing in the public services. Around 1974 **Siegel+Gale**, a pioneering document-design company, worked with Citibank in New York to write a loan agreement that customers and staff could understand. The Citibank loan note was so striking it was publicized across America. At federal level, it led to the Magnuson-Moss Act requiring guarantees to be in plain language. At state level, it led to laws requiring leases and consumer contracts to be clear, first in New York State in 1978 and then in many others. In 1975, **Sentry Insurance** issued its Plain Talk Auto Policy. In 1979, **Richard Wydick** published the first edition of his influential legal bestseller *Plain English for Lawyers*.

The fact that obscurity could be oppressive had been shown in the 1960s, when civil-rights activists challenged a Louisiana statute requiring black (African-American) people to interpret difficult passages from the constitution before they were allowed to vote. 'We hold,' said **John Minor Wisdom**, the judge, 'that this wall, built to bar negroes from access to the franchise, must come down.'

In 1971–2 the **American National Council of Teachers of English** formed a Public Doublespeak Committee to highlight deceptive language by public figures, and since 1975 has given its annual George Orwell Award for honesty and clarity in public language.

In 1978 **President Jimmy Carter** signed executive order 12 044 requiring regulations to be written in plain English. In 1998 **President Bill Clinton** issued a memorandum, 'Plain Language in Government Writing,' which said:

The Federal Government's writing must be in plain language. By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the Government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. Plain language saves the Government and the private sector time, effort, and money.

Plain language requirements vary from one document to another, depending on the intended audience. Plain language documents have logical organization, easy-to-read design features, and use:

- common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms;
- "you" and other pronouns;
- the active voice; and
- short sentences.

The Clinton memo then directed heads of executive departments and agencies to use plain language in all new documents that explained how to get a benefit or service ‘or how to comply with a regulation you administer or enforce.’ Regulations were excluded from this, but the memo also required plain language ‘in all proposed and final rulemakings published in the *Federal Register*’.

Both the Carter and Clinton edicts died when their presidencies ended, and their influence dimmed over time. But in 2010 a tenacious campaign by the **Center for Plain Language** (founded in 2003 by Annetta Cheek, Ginny Redish, Joe Kimble, Susan Kleimann, Joanne Locke, Melodee Mercer, and Peter Strylowski) led the House of Representatives and Senate to pass the Plain Writing Act. This required most kinds of federal-government information (except regulations) to be written in plain language. It defined this as text which is clear, concise, and well organized, and which follows other best practices suitable to the subject or field and intended readership. It also stated what government agencies must do to achieve these goals, and required guidance to be given them. So, for once, there was hope that government really would communicate more clearly with the people.

In 1998 the **Securities and Exchange Commission** (SEC) instructed corporations to write key parts of stock and bond prospectuses—especially the cover page, summary, and risk factors—in plain language. **Arthur Levitt Jr**, SEC chairman, told Associated Press, ‘I’ve been around our markets for most of my life and I can’t understand much of what passes for disclosure.’ (*Sacramento Bee*, 14 January 1997) To help corporations comply, the SEC website offered an excellent free guide to writing plain language in financial documents, the *Plain English Handbook*, in 1999. **Warren Buffett**, an investor with cult status in the US, said in the foreword:

When writing [my company’s] annual report, I pretend that I’m talking to my sisters. I have no trouble picturing them: Though highly intelligent, they are not experts in accounting or finance. They will understand plain English, but jargon may puzzle them. My goal is simply to give them the information I would wish them to supply me if our positions were reversed. To succeed, I don’t need to be Shakespeare; I must, though, have a sincere desire to inform.

Using the expertise of plain-language champion **William Lutz**, the SEC updated its guidance in 2006 as *An Information Design Handbook: creating clear financial disclosure documents*. In 2010, **President Obama** signed into law the **Dodd–Frank Act** that, among other things, ‘required that disclosures about the terms of home-mortgage loans be written in plain language and validated through consumer testing.’ (See Schriver K A, in ‘General sources.’)

The value of thinking about an audience's needs and, ideally, testing the usability of public documents with them was evident in the muddle over the **US presidential elections in 2000**. In Palm Beach County, the election supervisor decided that with ten names to fit on the ballot paper, two pages would be better than one—it would help the mainly elderly electorate. She got the design of the paper approved by all the parties and the authorities. Yet when the voters came to use it, the design so misled them that 19,000 people double-punched their papers, invalidating them, while many Democrats inadvertently voted for a right-wing candidate. From the ensuing mayhem, George W Bush emerged victorious. World history was significantly altered by the avoidable accident of a poor piece of document design.

## Recent times: the UK

In the United Kingdom, there was a whiff of book-burning on 26 July 1979 as **Martin Cutts** and **Chrissie Maher** launched their Plain English Campaign by shredding boxes of unclear forms in Parliament Square, London. They helped persuade the incoming Conservative government led by **Margaret Thatcher** to issue a policy statement ordering departments for the first time to count their forms, abolish unnecessary ones, clarify the rest, and report their progress annually to her. The Plain English Campaign wrote a guide for the civil service called *The Word is Plain English* (1983), which the civil service itself revised and reissued as *Making it Plain* in 1988 with a prime-ministerial foreword. The government-funded **National Consumer Council** pushed hard for plain English, publishing *Gobbledygook* by Tom Vernon (1980) and *Plain English for Lawyers* (1984). It also paid for the Plain English Campaign to publish *Small Print* in 1983, a booklet showing how consumer contracts could be clarified.

By the end of the 1980s, after a decade of public ridicule about bureaucratic English, it was hard to find a truly dire central government form. Local government was influenced too. Some town halls and housing associations began to use panels of residents and officials to vet forms and leaflets for clarity.

Clear documents act as good models. The **Health and Safety Executive** issued *Health and Safety at Motor Sports Events*, a thing of beauty, with lively writing, attractive page layouts, and good photos. **Bromley Council** published a fine guide to walking the Downe valley, *Exploring in Darwin's footsteps*. And the **Campaign to Protect Rural England** provided several well-written and attractive booklets on the planning system.

Clarity accreditation schemes for documents and websites began to be marketed commercially, two of the best known being run by the businesses **Plain Language Commission** (the Clear English Standard, from 1994) and



**Plain English Campaign Ltd** (the Crystal Mark, from 1990). Documents (and, later, websites) meeting each scheme's criteria could display the scheme logo, which further publicized the accreditation and attracted new customers.

The **1974 Consumer Credit Act** includes the first use of the term *plain English* in British law, requiring credit-reference agencies to give consumers, on request, the contents of their file 'in plain English'. So if companies were using code or some other abbreviated form, they had to convert the file into language that ordinary people could readily understand.

European law has improved the clarity of consumer contracts in the UK and the rest of the EU. **EC Council directive 93/13** required unfair terms to be removed, and:

In the case of contracts where all or certain terms offered to the consumer are in writing, these terms must always be drafted in plain, intelligible language. Where there is doubt about the meaning of a term, the interpretation most favourable to the consumer shall prevail.

The **Office of Fair Trading (OFT)** became one of the main enforcers of regulation 7 of the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999, which, in line with the directive, required that a 'seller shall [i.e. must] ensure that any written term of a contract is expressed in plain, intelligible language'. The OFT said: 'A term is open to challenge as unfair if it could put the consumer at a disadvantage because he or she is not clear about its meaning—even if its meaning could be worked out by a lawyer.' Even the core terms—those setting out the price or defining the product—had to comply with the plain-language rule; otherwise, they could be subject to a test of fairness. The OFT also said that 'jargon-free language is of no value to consumers unless it is in legible print', and used its powers to ensure print was big enough to read. This affected, for example, car-hire contracts, which could often be read only with a magnifying glass. The OFT website published a quarterly bulletin of case reports on the contract terms it ordered to be rewritten or deleted. Bulletins 23–25 (2003) condemned terms and expressions like *indemnify; principals; shall vest in the pupil; tenants in common; joint and several liability; right of appropriation; we shall lay blameless; herein; lien; reversion; long term reduced payment moratorium; forthwith; time is of the essence; without prejudice; mutatis mutandis; void or voidable; successors in title; demises; undertake; and condition precedent*.

Often an OFT challenge resulted in whole clauses being deleted because they were unnecessary, meaningless, or unlawful. This clause failed because it was too broad a general exclusion as well as being hard to understand:

Neither we nor our servants or agents will be under any liability in respect of defects in goods delivered or for any injury, damage or loss resulting from such defects, whatsoever and however caused and whether such injury, loss or damage be by direct

or consequential means and notwithstanding that the same may be due to the negligence act or omission of ourselves, our servants or agents, and our liability under this clause shall be in lieu of any warranty or conditions implied by law as to the quality or fitness for any particular purpose of such goods.

After a time, the OFT seemed to lose interest in enforcing the plain-language regulations. Its abolition in 2013 led to cash-strapped trading-standards officials taking over the role. Their lack of resources and softly-softly approach meant even less enforcement.

For details of the **Consumer Rights Act 2015**, which replaces the 1999 regulations, see ‘Starting points’, the introductory chapter to this book.

If there is complexity in the language of statute law, this will usually be reflected in guidance issued to the public. In 1994, my **Clearer Timeshare Act** (a law rewritten in plain English and later published in *Lucid Law*) was tested with 90 senior law students. Nine out of ten preferred the plain version to the real Act. Performance also improved: on one key question, 94 per cent got the correct answer when working with the plain version, while only 48 per cent did so with the real Act. The pretend law was never meant to become the real thing, but it had an immediate effect. Two groups of tax and accountancy professionals were formed to persuade the government to translate tax laws into plainer English. Surprisingly, the government’s own law drafters did something similar, effectively rewriting a piece of their own work.

As a result, in 1995 the government set up the **Tax Law Rewrite Project** to transform tax law into plainer English. Chunks of the rewritten tax law are now in force, and there is also a new, clearer page layout for all laws. Some new laws read as if they have been heavily influenced by plain-language thinking. The **Elections Act 2001**, the **Human Rights Act 1998**, the **Land Registration Act 2002**, and the **Arbitration Act 1996** all use short sentences and well-constructed vertical lists. There is still much to do: one transposition of a European Commission (EC) directive into British law includes a 202-word sentence, even though the original EC text was fairly straightforward. This kind of complexity imposes a heavy cost on those who must comply.

Much depends on who is thought to be the **audience for legislation**. I have pushed for legislators to regard their primary audience as interested private citizens, not lawyers. Laws may never be written in the plainest of plain language, but they should at least be understandable to reasonably literate, motivated people who are prepared to make an effort. It may be a pretty big effort, of course, especially in technical areas of law. Yet many non-lawyers must from time to time read laws in their raw state: police officers, local council officials, special interest groups, and that group of ordinary citizens who happen—usually without the benefit of any training in the law—to have been elected as members of the various

UK parliaments. Focusing on their needs would help to clarify the law for all, including lawyers.

Anyone reading the daily papers in June 2006 might have thought plain English was about to become the new language of the law. There was widespread coverage of the draft **Coroner Reform Bill**, which was said to be written in plain English. Indeed, a government news release stated this. Headed 'First Bill to be written in plain English', the release announced '[this] will... be the first Bill that will be published in plain English—so that anyone can read it and know what changes it is making.' In *The Guardian*, the minister responsible wrote:

So it's to help the public that my new bill which reforms the inquest system is drafted in—shock, horror—ordinary English. The "Plain English" coroner reform bill is accompanied by the usual legalese on the facing page.

The real shock and horror, though, was that these claims were untrue. The Bill was written in the same style as most Bills ('the usual legalese'). The only innovation was that the explanatory notes that come with all Bills had been typeset opposite the proposed law, instead of being printed separately. There was, quite simply, no plain-English Bill of any kind. It was all publicity-seeking spin that fooled the newspapers. A false dawn, and the Bill eventually disappeared from view.

Echoing the Palm Beach fiasco in the US, **Scotland's government changed control** in 2007 because of baffling ballot papers. In this case, pretesting and expert opinion predicted trouble, but officials and politicians pressed on regardless. On election day, voters had to fill in two forms. On one form, according to the small-print headings, they had to put a cross for a single candidate in each of two columns: the first column was for a proportional representation vote for a party list; the second column was for a winner-takes-all constituency member of parliament. But many voters misread or didn't read the headings. They thought the two columns formed one continuous list, and put both their crosses in a single column, spoiling their papers. What could go wrong with the second form, for the local-council elections? It used a different system—a single transferable vote. Voters had to put numbers alongside up to eight candidates in their chosen order. Naturally, many used the method they'd just used on the other form, marking a cross or sometimes several crosses in the boxes. This was a blunder, too, so some 147,000 ballot papers (4 per cent) were spoiled and therefore rejected. In some constituencies, the number of spoiled papers outstripped the victor's majority. The governing party was defeated by a single seat. As the victorious Scottish National Party's platform included independence for Scotland, a pair of unclear forms could well have begun the eventual break-up of the UK. It showed that when readers' behaviour is ignored, unintended consequences flow.

## Recent times: other countries

In **Australia** during the 1970s the first car insurance policy that could reasonably be called ‘plain’ was issued, and the example was widely copied and refined there and in the UK. In 1984 the **Australian government** adopted a plain-language approach to public documents and extended it to the language of the law itself. Today, law-writers in Canberra take advice from their own *Plain English Manual*. In 1986, the **Law Reform Commission of Victoria** published *Legislation, Legal Rights and Plain English*, a discussion paper prepared by **Professor Robert Eagleson** that considered ways of clarifying the language of the law. In **Queensland** the Industrial Relations Reform Bill 1993 legislated for clarity—tribunal decisions must be ‘expressed in plain English’ and ‘structured in a way that is as easy to understand as the subject matter allows’. Today, prominent bodies in associated fields include the **Plain English Foundation** and the **Communications Research Institute**.

Several Nordic governments have busied themselves with plain-language work. For many years, advocates of plain Swedish have influenced the language of new laws in **Sweden**. No government bill, including proposed Acts of Parliament, may be printed without approval from the ministry of justice’s ‘division for legal and linguistic draft revision’. In 2001 it revised 1,306 acts and ordinances and 122 committee terms of reference. At the time of writing (2019), the website **Klarspråk** (clear language) and the **Plain Swedish Office** of the Language Council of Sweden (Språkrådet) remain enthusiastic advocates for plain language among government bodies.

In **New Zealand**, the Write Group runs the commercial WriteMark accreditation scheme for documents written in plain English. It sponsors an annual, independently judged, open competition for good documents, the WriteMark New Zealand Plain English Awards.

When Nelson Mandela became president of **South Africa** in 1994, he wanted the new constitution to be clearly written, a task partly performed by the Canadian lawyer and plain-language specialist Phil Knight.

In the **European Commission** (the executive body responsible for running the European Union day-to-day), translators have led the way in campaigning for plain language across the institutions—they say it reduces costs and produces a better basis for translation. The English-language-based Fight the Fog initiative, which began in 1998, was relaunched in 2010 as a multilingual Clear Writing Campaign. Its booklet *How to write clearly* is available free online from the EU’s bookshop in all member-state languages. Its companion, *Claire’s Clear Writing Tips*, is available in English and French.

## Promoting plain language internationally

Internationally, two not-for-profit membership bodies promote plain language: **Clarity** (founded in 1983 by **John Walton**, a British lawyer) publishes a newsletter on plain legal English; and, for other professionals working in the field, **Plain Language Association International** (PLAIN, founded in 2008 by **Cheryl Stephens** and **Kate Harrison Whiteside**, which evolved from the Plain Language Consultants Network they founded in 1993). Both groups arrange regular conferences where devotees seek to push plain language forward.

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- Kimble, J (2017) *Seeing through Legalese* (Durham, N Carolina).
- Mellinkoff, D (1963) *The Language of the Law* (Boston, Massachusetts).
- Mowat, C (2015) *A Plain-Language Handbook for Legal Writers* (Toronto).
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## SPECIFIC SOURCES AND NOTES

### Starting points

- page ix      Some of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's lectures are available from <<http://www.online-literature.com>>.
- pages ix–xv      Northamptonshire Police job advert: *Mail Online*, 7 May 2015. Councillor Wilkinson: *The Teesdale Mercury*, 23 November 2006. Judge Openshaw: *The Times*, 17 May 2007. Lord Justice Harman: *Davy v Leeds Corporation* (1964) 3 All ER 390, 394 and 1 WLR 1218 at 1224. Tenerife plane crash (Los Rodeos airport): *Fatal Words* (Chicago, 1997) by Steven Cushing. Derek Bentley—he was granted a posthumous royal pardon and his murder conviction quashed. Lady Justice Hallett: *The Independent*, 6 May 2011; *Pikestaff* 47 and 49 from <<http://www.clearest.co.uk>>; and *Coroner's Inquests into the London Bombings of 7 July 2005*. The advice on plain English from gov.uk is at <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk#plain-english>>, accessed 14 March 2019. The Turing letter is given in full in *The Essential Turing* by B J Copeland (Oxford, 2004), and the letter and minute are Crown copyright.
- pages xix–xx      The studies on jury instructions are quoted in Joseph Kimble's paper *Answering the Critics of Plain Language* (see 'Legal language', earlier). The primary sources are Charrow R P and Charrow V R *Making Legal Language Understandable: a Psychological Study of Jury Instructions*, 79 *Columbia Law Review* 1306, 1370 (1979); and Benson R W *The End of Legalese: The Game Is Over*, 13 *New York University Review of Law & Social Change* 519, 546 (1984–5).

page xx Work on the Social Security Administration form is thoroughly described in Clarity, issue 45 pp 2–4, <<http://www.clarity-international.net>>.

#### chapter 1

page 2 Philip Yaffe *The Gettysburg Approach to Writing & Speaking like a Professional* (Amazon ebook, 2010).

page 3 The core statement is a variation of the core sentence described in *Write To Win* by Thomas McKeown (North Vancouver, 1987).

page 6 For the section on different approaches to planning, I have drawn on *Writing Strategies and Writers' Tools* by Daniel Chandler (*English Today* 34, vol 9, 2 1994).

page 7 Dr Flowers' work is reported in *Getting the Structure Right: Process, Paradigm and Persistence* by Christopher Balmford (Clarity, issue 43 pp. 14–23, May 1999). The original source is *Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge: Roles and the Writing Process* (44 Proceedings of the Conference of College Teachers of English 7–10, 1997).

#### chapter 2

page 10 The six journalistic tactics listed are adapted from *10 ways to engage readers with alternative story forms* (2016) by Vicki Krueger <<https://www.poynter.org>>.

#### chapter 3

page 23 The analysis of American sentence length is included in *Computer Analysis of Present-day American English* by H Kucera and W N Francis (Providence, Rhode Island, 1967).

#### chapter 4

page 36 ASD Simplified Technical English: see Mike Unwalla's articles *AECMA Simplified English*, *Communicator*, Winter 2004, and *STE is good English*, *Communicator*, Summer 2019; and his website <<https://www.techscribe.co.uk>>.

page 46 The study referring to unconsciousness was reported in *The Daily Telegraph* on 24 February 2000.

page 47 The research study among scientists is described in Turk and Kirkman (see 'General sources').

page 56 *The Living Word Vocabulary* is by E Dale and J O'Rourke (© World Book, Inc., US 1976) and can be borrowed from the British Library.



## chapter 5

page 58 Strunk is quoted in *The Elements of Style* by Strunk W and White E B (New York, 1979).

## chapter 6

page 69 Orwell's commands are quoted under his entry in the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford, 2018) and in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, included in *Shooting the Elephant and Other Essays* (London, 1950).

page 76 Among the many who recommend the use of *I* and *we* are Booth V *Writing a Scientific Paper* (London and Colchester, Biochemical Society, 1981); and Barrass R *Scientists Must Write* (London, 1978).

page 77 Information on the passive percentage is drawn from a manual accompanying the software program *StyleWriter—the Plain English Editor* (Editor Software Pty Ltd, 1994).

## chapter 13

page 140 C L R James was writing of the cricketer Learie Constantine in *Beyond a Boundary* (London, 1963).

## chapter 14

pages 155–6 Wallers R and Kern T H *Johns Hopkins Magazine* (1991).

## chapter 15

pages 159–60 Cheek and co-authors: *International plain language standards—the View from the Center for Plain Language* (Clarity, issue 59, 2008).

## chapter 17

page 165 Nesfield's book, long out of print, was published by Macmillan, London. Updated variations are used in India.

## chapter 18

page 175 Cliché bingo—*Buxton Advertiser* 21 February 2013, 7 September 2017.

## chapter 19

page 182 A detailed study of readability formulas is given in *Predicting Readability of Data Processing Written Materials* by Ronald Guillemette (Data Base, Summer 1987, pp 40–7). Another useful source is *Tackling NHS Jargon* by Sarah Carr (Abingdon, 2002).

## chapter 21

pages 193 The Stoke Park email was widely reproduced, e.g. *Daily Mail*, 23 October 2012.

## chapter 22

page 195 Benedetti article: *Scottish Sun*, 24 August 2012.  
 page 196 Sex-neutral parliamentary drafting: *The Guardian*, 9 March 2007.  
 page 203 Transgender language: *The Times* 'Feminist poster girl hits brick wall' (26 September 2018); 'Smear test campaign drops the word *woman*' (15 June 2018); 'No outsiders' (editorial) (24 May 2019).

## chapter 25

page 220 Gerald Ratner was speaking to an Institute of Directors event at the Royal Albert Hall in 1991. He went on to found and run other successful businesses.  
 page 228 The advice came from John Rimington, head of the Health and Safety Executive, in a note to staff seen by the author.

## chapter 26

page 230 The work by University of Michigan psychologists H Song and N Schwarz was mentioned in *Science Daily*, 31 October 2008, reporting on a paper in *Psychological Science*, October 2008.  
 page 237 Accepting a communications award in 2012, the creator of the Haynes manuals, John H Haynes, said: 'I have always aimed to keep technical writing as simple, clear, and straightforward as possible and what has helped enormously... is the use of step-by-step photographs... When, for example, explaining how to re-assemble a motor car engine, numbering and alphabetically lettering component parts, nuts, bolts, etc. helps considerably to keep the accompanying text short, clear, and to the point.'  
 page 239 The US figures on child restraint systems are given at <<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/duip/spotlite/chldseat.htm>> (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services). The Derbyshire (UK) figures come from the *Buxton Advertiser*, 5 June 2008.

## chapter 27

page 243 A valuable source for this chapter was *Writing for the Web* by Susannah Ross (Edinburgh, 2007).

page 245–6 Dr Jakob Nielsen's work is quoted from <<http://www.nngroup.com>>, with permission.

## chapter 28

page 253 Mark Adler was writing in the Information Design Journal 7/2 (1993): *Why Do Lawyers Talk Funny?*

## chapter 30

page 282 A fine short primer on typography for different purposes (print, screen etc.) is Paul Luna's article 'Choosing Type for Information Design' in Black A, Luna P, Lund O, and Walker S *Information Design: Research and Practice* (see 'General sources').

page 286 and 292 Colin Wheildon's work is described in *Type and Layout: How typography and design can get your message across—or get in the way* (Berkeley, California, 1995).

## Appendix 2

page 313 *Health and Safety at Motor Sports Events* (1999), (HGS112). <[http://www.integer.co.uk/resources/HSG112%20Health%20and%20safety%20at%20motor%20sport%20events\\_1999.pdf](http://www.integer.co.uk/resources/HSG112%20Health%20and%20safety%20at%20motor%20sport%20events_1999.pdf)>.

page 315 Work on the Clearer Timeshare Act is published in *Lucid Law* (see 'Legal language'). This and other efforts to clarify statutes are explored in *The Law-Making Process* by Michael Zander (London, 1994).

page 316 The minister responsible for the Coroner Reform Bill was writing in *The Guardian* on 12 June 2006.

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