

The Art of Writing in Plain English

Your guide to writing easy-to-understand, plain English documents that will
transform the way you do business.



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Introduction

There is a lot of information in cyber space and on the bookstore's shelves on writing in plain English. A simple Google search will come up with pages of resources for you to peruse at your leisure.

Bringing all the information together in one place and in an order that helps you to achieve your goal—writing clear, concise, easy to understand documents that engages your audience, is time consuming. And for many, time is a limited resource.

So that is why I have put together this short plain English guide for you and your staff.

In it I have brought together many of the guiding principles of plain English into one short easy reference document that can sit on your desktop, or as a hard copy in your desk drawer.

It is designed as a tool for small to medium sized business owners to encourage and assist their teams in writing well.

Background

The Plain Language movement began in the United States in the 1960's. It received so much attention that it resulted in legislation requiring the use of plain language in public and commercial documents.

In the United Kingdom the 'Plain English Campaign' has been campaigning against gobbledegook, jargon and misleading public information since 1979 and plain language is also becoming more widely used in the legal fraternity. Clarity International is a worldwide group of lawyers and others who have been advocating the use of plain language in place of legalese.

The plain language or plain English movement has been around for a while. However, it continues to gain momentum as the benefits and return on investment (ROI) of user friendly writing are becoming more obvious in the business, government and corporate world.

Plain English is not about dumbing down. It is not using words that are merely simplistic or childish. It is about writing with your audience in mind. It takes care not to assume your audience's prior knowledge of your product or service, or their background knowledge of your business or your industry. What it does do though, is to place the needs of your audience over other considerations.

Definition

“A communication is in plain English if it meets the needs of its audience – by using language, structure and design so clearly and effectively that the audience has the best possible chance of readily finding what they need, understanding it and using it.”

This definition was accepted by the International Plain Language Working Group and was found in Cheek, A. 'Defining plain Language.' Clarity 64 (2010): 5-25

In other words plain English is a writing style. The language, structure and design of a document all work together to help the reader understand it at first reading, in a way that the writer meant it to be understood.

The advantages of a document written in plain English are:

- It's faster to write
- It's faster to read
- It's easier to get your message across
- It has a friendlier tone

Elements of plain English

Joe Kimble in 'The Elements of Plain Language' (2006) suggests the following general elements of plain language.

1. As the starting point and at every point, design and write the document in a way that serves the reader. Your main goal is to convey your ideas with the greatest possible clarity.
2. Resist the urge to sound formal. Relax and be natural (but not too informal). Try for the same unaffected tone you would use if you were speaking to the reader in person.

3. Omit unnecessary detail. Boil down the information to what your reader needs to know.
4. Use examples as needed to help explain the text.
5. Whenever possible, test consumer documents on a small group of typical users—and improve the documents as need be.

Various resources refer to a differing number of elements that make up what is now commonly referred to as plain language or plain English. I have broken them down into the following ten key elements.

1. Shorter sentences
2. Use of simple every day words
3. Use culture and gender neutral language
4. Avoidance of superfluous words
5. Use of active voice
6. Use of familiar concrete words
7. Use of 'you' and 'we'
8. Writing in the positive
9. Nominalisations
10. Use of correct grammar and punctuation

Each of these elements work together in a document to ensure that the writing is clear, concise, easy to understand and audience focused. I will explain each one, with examples, in more detail.

1. Shorter sentences (15-25 words)

Sentences of 15-25 words appear to be an industry standard also used by authors and journalists. However, it in no way means that every sentence should be the same length. Vary your sentence length so some are short and some a little longer. Don't have one sentence where you can have two. Be punchy.

Example from a lawyer's website

Please note that, by law, if an employee wishes to be employed by an employer whose work-place involves employees affiliated to a Union, the employer is only permitted to offer the same terms and conditions to an employee pursuant to an individual employment agreement as that recorded in the collective agreement which the employer has with the Union for one month and thereafter it is open to the employer to negotiate a different employment agreement on an individual basis with the employee direct. (One sentence - 84 words.)

Rewritten to read

The law requires employees who take a job with an employer where the staff are affiliated to a union, to have the same terms and conditions as those recorded in the collective agreement. However, after a month the employer can then negotiate with the employee a new individual employment agreement.

2. Use simple everyday words

Simple words are often quicker to read, easier to understand and make the document flow more easily. It will also make the document more readable to a wider audience (more on audience later).

This downloadable PDF - <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf> is a useful tool and offers some alternative word choices. I have used it as a quick reference. However, over time the alternative word choices become second nature.

Here a few examples of concise and simple words

Instead of	Use
Utilise	Help
Remittance	Payment
In respect of	About
Call a halt	Stop
In the vicinity	Near
abundance	Enough, plenty, a lot (or say how many)
accede	To allow, agree to
Accelerate	Speed up
accentuate	Stress
Bestow	Give, award
Belated	Late

3. Culture and gender neutral language

Masculine pronouns have traditionally been used in writing and speaking when we don't know the person's gender or we mean both male and female. This reduces clarity because the reader won't know if you are you talking about all humans or specifically men.

Gender neutral language is more inclusive, so keep your writing neutral by avoiding the use of a personal pronoun or use the plural 'they' or 'their'. Plural language is a good way to avoid sexist language.

For example in a generic policy document describing a manager's accountability, instead of;

"He is required to report to the chairman weekly."

Write

"The manager is required to report to the Chairperson weekly."

Examples of some gender neutral nouns

Instead of	Use
Policeman	Police Officer
Fireman	Firefighter
Man	Person or individual
Postman	Postie
Chairman	Chair or Chairperson

Also avoid using common stereotypes like female pharmacist or lady driver. Ask yourself would you say male pharmacist or male driver? Pharmacist and driver will suffice.

4. Avoid superfluous words

Superfluous words are beyond what is required or sufficient. They may include tautologies, empty adjectives or simply do not add value to the meaning you are trying to convey. For example:

“I am trying to lose **excess** weight.” (You wouldn’t be trying to lose weight unless it was excess.)

“We distributed **surplus** food to the needy.” (Does surplus add value to the meaning or understanding of the sentence?)

Here are some more examples

Instead of	Use
Afford an opportunity	Let, allow
Costs the sum of	Costs
Despite the fact that	Though, although
During which time	While
In order to	To

In the event that	If
Subsequent to	After
Despite the fact that	Although
Because of the fact that	Because, since
In light of	Because, since
Owing to the fact that	Because, since

Tautology- This is the needless repetition of an idea in a different word, phrase or sentence.

For example:

Collaborate together	The two twins
Exact replica	Advance warning
Plummet down	Period of time
True facts	The true facts are these
It's a serious crisis	Killed dead

Adjectives- Keep these to a minimum. Use an adjective to denote 'kind' rather than degree, for example, economic crisis or military disaster. To say 'serious crisis' is superfluous – if it's a crisis it's serious.

The words – very, totally and completely are often redundant.

Have a look at the following examples:

Before

The following summary is intended only to highlight certain information contained elsewhere in this prospectus.

After

This summary highlights some information from this prospectus.

Before

Disclaim any and all responsibility for any inaccuracy, error, omission, lateness, or any other kind of inadequacy, deficiency or flaw in, or in relation to, the information;

After

Refuse to acknowledge responsibility for any inaccuracy, omission, lateness or other kind of inadequacy or flaw, in or relating to, the information;

[Inadequacy and deficiency are synonyms (Collins Thesaurus Concise Edition, third edition 2006)].

5. Active voice

Readers understand sentences in the active voice more quickly and easily because it follows how we think and process information. Active sentences are more direct, lively and interesting.

In the *active* voice, the subject acts, in the *passive* voice the subject is acted upon.

For example,

Active The man kicks the dog- (the subject does the action)
 Subject + verb + object

Passive The dog was kicked by the man- (the object is acted upon)
 Object + verb + subject

Say we will do it, rather than it will be done. To recognise the passive voice ask yourself, does the sentence use a form of the verb 'to be' with another verb in the past tense (in this case 'was kicked') and a prepositional phrase beginning with 'by?'

Note that the subject is not always a person and the object is not always a thing.

However, please note that there is sometimes a place for the use of the passive. It can be used to soften the tone by being less blunt or hostile, particularly if your message is a difficult one. But aim to make 80-90% of your verbs active.

For example,

Active: We posted your overdue account last week.

Passive: Last week your overdue account was posted to you.

Active: The Company will be making redundancies.

Passive Redundancies will be made by the company.

6. Use of familiar concrete words

Concrete language relates to real world rather than abstractions. Concrete language is tangible, things perceived through the senses - sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. For example; table, soft, loud, bitter, blood. Abstract language is not perceived through the senses. It refers to ideas, concepts, qualities, states of mind, for example, beauty, truth, love, doubt, God.

For example:

Abstract: "Subject to procedures described herein."

Concrete: "By following the directions on page 10," (both concrete and uses everyday language.)

Here is an example that uses abstract language and unfamiliar words re-written using concrete language and familiar words:

Before

The Government of India has requested access to the New Zealand market for fresh mango fruit (*Mangifera indica*) for consumption. This pathway has the

potential to introduce exotic pests and diseases to New Zealand and therefore assessment is required to determine the appropriate risk mitigation measures.

After

The Government of India has requested access to the New Zealand market for fresh mango fruit for consumption. This course of action has the potential to introduce exotic pests and diseases to New Zealand, so an assessment is required to work out how to reduce the risk.

“Language that is more concrete and specific creates pictures in the mind of [your] listener, pictures that should come as close as possible to the pictures in your mind.”

William Lutz

The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore

7. Use ‘you’ and ‘we’

The use of personal pronouns clarifies for the reader who is speaking and what applies to them and what applies to you, the writer.

It engages the audience by speaking directly to them. It keeps them reading and has a friendlier tone. First and second person pronouns aren’t gender specific. Use we, us, ours for first person plural and you, your, yours for second person singular.

Take a look at this example

Before

Observed from 08:51 to 08:57

A penalty charge of \$70 is now payable and must be paid not later than the last day of the period of 28 days beginning with the date on which this PCN was served (i.e. 22/09/2010)

The penalty charge will be reduced by a discount of 50% if it is paid not later than the last day of the period of 14 days beginning with the date on which this PCN was served (i.e. 08/09/2010)

DO NOT PAY THE CIVIL ENFORCEMENT OFFICER

Here it is re-written using personal pronouns, active voice and simple, concrete language.

The traffic warden saw your vehicle was parked illegally from 8:51am to 8:57am.

You must now pay a penalty charge of \$70 within 28 days, beginning with the date on which we served this notice (in other words, by 22 September 2010).

We will reduce the penalty charge to \$35 if you pay it within 14 days (in other words, by 8 September 2010).

Do not pay the traffic warden.

Before

No person has been authorised to give any information or make any representation other than those contained or incorporated by reference in this joint proxy statement/prospectus, and, if given or made, such information or representation must not be relied upon as having been authorised.

After

You should rely only on the information contained in this document or information we have referred you to. We have not authorised anyone to provide you with different information.

8. Write in the positive

It is good to write in the positive. Tell your audience what they can do, not what they can't do. Tell them how the benefits will improve their lifestyle not prevent or stop something else happening. If the audience for your document is internal (staff or colleagues), it is also important to write in the positive.

For example, instead of writing;

“If you think you can't afford to buy the lounge suite now, we will give you 12 months interest free terms and you can take it home today.”

You would be better to write;

“With our 12 months interest free terms you could be sitting on this lounge suite tonight.”

Customers don't like to be told what they can't do and can't afford. Writing in the positive makes customers, clients or colleagues feel positive towards the organisation and more likely to engage with what they are reading.

9. Nominalisations

Nominalisations turn a verb (action) or an adjective (description) into a noun (name of person, place or thing). Nominalisations are considered to make sentences more difficult to follow and promote wordiness.

Blogger and blogosphere are examples of nouns from a verb.

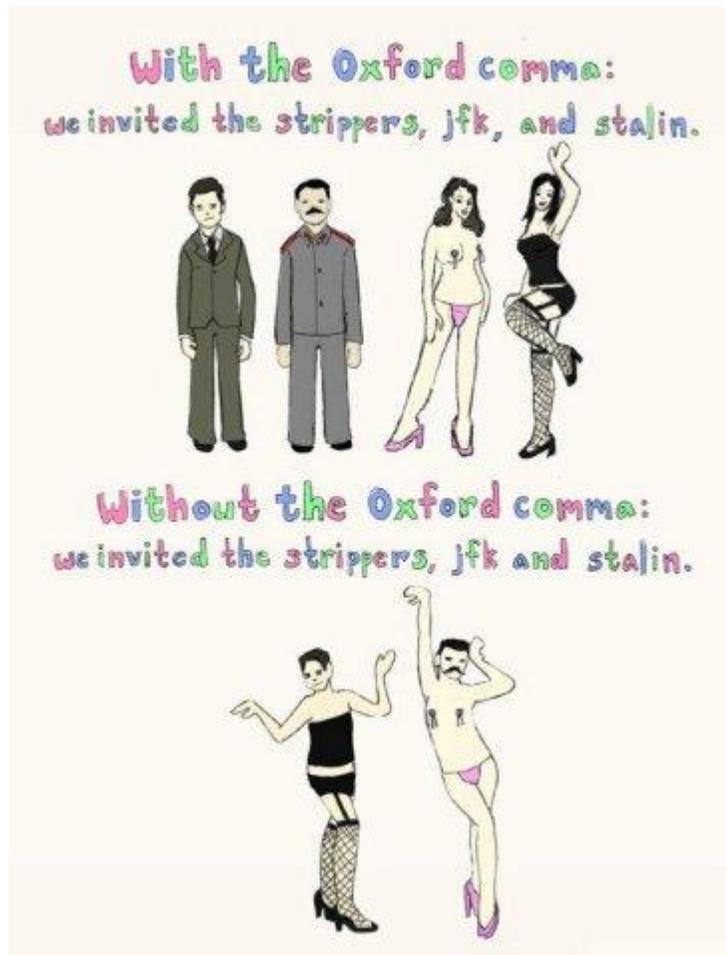
Common cases of verbs being used as nouns is the addition of the suffix – ing or –ion; swimming from swim, running from run, editing from edit, reaction from react, nominalisation from nominalise.

“The cooking took five hours.”

“An evaluation was undertaken.”

10. Use of correct grammar and punctuation

Correct grammar and punctuation assists with the meaning and readability of the text. This picture shows you how important a comma in the right place can be to meaning.



There are many grammar and punctuation books on the market. I would recommend getting a good one and keeping it on hand. They are a great resource for things like when to use which and that, neither, nor and, like the example above, checking comma usage.

Audience

Your message is effective when you have a clear understanding of your organisational purposes, the context of your message and your audience.

You cannot assume the literacy level of your audience or that they have detailed knowledge of your business/organisation. Even within organisations, in-group jargon can vary between teams, a community of practice or within management. Knowing your audience is the key to how and what you write. If you are part of a technical team and your target audience is only the technical team, then there is a place for jargon. However, writing in plain English is still beneficial because it is easier to read with its shorter sentences, active voice and concise language.

Easier text can compensate for lower levels of prior knowledge, reading skill, interest and motivation.

Our fast-paced society and demanding workplaces require us to read a lot of documentation in a short space of time. If you can understand a document on the first read, it will result in higher levels of engagement with the information.

Reader benefits

There are a number of benefits of plain English for your reader (your audience).

- Greater comprehension
- Retention of the information read
- Quicker to read
- Perseverance - they will read to the end of the document

For your messages to be successful they must meet the needs of your audience.

Ask yourself the following questions as you plan your writing:

1. What are your **purposes** for writing or speaking? Is it to sell, persuade, inform or announce a new policy? What do you want your readers to know, to see or to feel?
2. Who is your **audience**? Who are you writing to? Plain English is more than shortening words and sentences; you also have to adjust the factors of style, organisation, tone, approach and design to the reading habits of your audience. Your document is successful if your target audience can read it easily, understand the content and utilise the content productively.
3. What **information** must your message include?
4. What reasons or reader **benefits** can you use to support your position? Business communications need to both solve the organisational problem and meet the psychological needs of the people involved.
5. What **objections** can you expect your readers to have? What negative elements of your message must you de-emphasise or overcome?
6. How will **context** affect reader response? Think about:
 - Your relationship to the reader
 - Morale in the organisation
 - The economy
 - Time of year
 - Any special circumstances
 - Knowledge of the topic.

(Kitty O. Locker Stephen Kyo Kaczmarek, 2007, pp. 20-21)

What to avoid when writing plain English

Acronyms

If you have to use acronyms, explain them the first time they appear on the page, for example, The New Zealand Institute of Management (NZIM) believes that....NZIM have for many years agreed to...

Legalese

Legalese is specialised vocabulary of the legal profession (Lawyers and legal documents). It is characterised by archaic usage, wordiness, redundancy and extreme thoroughness.

Mutually exclusive language and jargon

Often teams or communities of practice have their own jargon. If this is used to a wider audience even within the organisation, it becomes mutually exclusive and builds barriers as opposed to creating goodwill. Most government and corporate organisations have jargon that is unique to them. There is a danger that because jargon is used frequently, it becomes assumed that all audiences will know what it means.

If the reader is confronted with something beyond comprehension they feel annoyed, intimidated and stupid. Not a great way to build customer or employee relationships.

Negative words

Avoid using words that are negative or have negative connotations. For example:

Avoid
Bored
Shouldn't
Don't

Aggravated
Deprived
Lack
Unjust

Wordiness

Try to use fewer words wherever possible. A good test is to read the sentence or paragraph aloud. If it is clumsy and you stumble over the sentence, it is likely it will be hard to read and understand.

Think about some of the words that you put together that could be replaced with a single word. For example, instead of 'so that,' replace with 'ensuring.'

Presentation of material

In our fast paced lives we want to be able to skim documents and identify chunks of information. Not only does our writing need to be in plain English, but as our definition explained, plain English is a writing style where the language, structure and design of a document all work together to help the reader.

The presentation of your document will add to its readability through:

- Descriptive headings and sub-headings
- The use of white space
- The use of lists and bullet points
- Grouping related information together
- Limiting the use of words set in all capitals. We read by shape and capitals make the shape of the word hard to define which slows down our reading.
- Visuals; a picture says a 1000 words (graphs/tables etc.)

Resources

Grammar websites

<http://www.grammarbook.com/>

<http://grammar.about.com/>

Plain English Web Resources

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>

<http://www.impact-information.com>

References

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