

15

Tips on Writing Plain English



Plain Language Commission

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- 1 Consider carefully your purpose and message before starting to write – clear writing and clear thinking go hand in hand.
- 2 Wear the readers' shoes – how would you feel in their position?
- 3 Plan a structure that will help the reader, perhaps with headings, bullet-point lists, and a pithy summary of key points at the start.

- 4 In letters and emails, tell the reader clearly, concisely and courteously what has happened, how the situation stands, and what they can expect next.
- 5 Match your writing to the needs and knowledge of the readers – some of them may be baffled by official jargon and procedures.

- 6 Write sentences that average 15–20 words.
- 7 Keep the word order simple. In most sentences, put the doer early and follow it with an active-voice verb.
- 8 Take pride in using everyday English, sound grammar and accurate punctuation.
- 9 Where appropriate, use 'I', 'we' and 'you' to make the writing more human.
- 10 Maintain the flow by starting some of your sentences with connectors like 'but', 'however', 'so' and 'because'.
- 11 Use commands when writing instructions.
- 12 Cut unnecessary words.

- 13 Check that the facts and judgement are right. Nothing compensates for inaccuracy or illogicality.
- 14 Pre-test your high-use documents with typical readers.

- 15 Apply common sense and scepticism to all guidance about writing.

- Find out more from the 'Oxford Guide to Plain English' by Martin Cutts, price £5.99.
- For details of the Clear English Standard, please visit our website, www.clearest.co.uk.