



## How to use plain English

Keeping language simple, to aid communication and understanding.

**Lets start by saying what plain English isn't. It's not 'cat sat on the mat or 'Peter and Jane' writing. Almost anything – from leaflets and letters to legal documents – can be written in plain English without being patronising or over-simple.**

It doesn't mean reducing the length or changing the meaning of your message. Most of the UK's biggest insurance companies produce policies that explain everything fully in plain English. It's not about banning new words, killing off long words or promoting completely perfect grammar. Nor is it about letting grammar slip. It is not an amateur's method of communication. Most forward-looking senior managers always write in plain English. And finally, it is not as easy as we would like to think.

So what is plain English? It is a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise.

Follow the six simple tips overleaf you will quickly start improve your communications skills.



# 1

## **Keep your sentences short.**

Most experts would agree that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

This does not mean making every sentence the same length. Be punchy. Vary your writing by mixing short sentences (like the last one) with longer ones (like this one), following the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence, plus perhaps one other related point. You should soon be able to keep to the average sentence length – used by top journalists and authors – quite easily.

However, at first you may still find yourself writing the odd long sentence, especially when trying to explain a complicated point. But most long sentences can be broken up in some way.

# 2

## **Prefer active verbs**

Do you want your letters to sound active or passive – crisp and professional or stuffy and bureaucratic?

To explain the difference between active and passive verbs, we need to look briefly at how a sentence fits together. There are three main parts to almost every sentence:

- a subject (the person, group or thing doing the action);
- a verb (the action itself); and
- an object (the person, group or thing that the action is done to).

To give an example, in the sentence 'Peter watched the television':

- the subject is Peter (he is doing the watching);
- the verb is watched; and
- the object is the television (it is being watched).

Of course, there will usually be lots of other words as well. For example: 'Peter, the boy from number 13, watched the television every Friday night'. But the subject, verb and object are still there.

With an active verb, the three parts appear in a particular order: subject then verb then object. For example:

Peter (subject) watched (verb) the television (object). 'Watched' is an active verb here. The sentence says who is doing the watching before it says what is being watched.

With a passive verb, the order is reversed: object then verb then subject.

The television (object) was watched (verb) by Peter (subject).

'Watched' is a passive verb here. The sentence says what is being watched before it says who is doing the watching.

You can see that by making the sentence passive, we have had to introduce the words 'was' and 'by', and the sentence becomes more clumsy.

### 3

#### Use 'you' and 'we'

Try to call the reader 'you', even if the reader is only one of many people you are talking about generally. If this feels wrong at first, remember that you wouldn't use words like 'the applicant' and 'the supplier' if you were speaking to somebody sitting across a desk from you.

Here are some examples of this.

Applicants must send us...

- You must send us...

We always tell customers before we...

- We will tell you before we...

Advice is available from...

- You can get advice from...

Similarly, always call your organisation 'we'. And there is nothing wrong with using 'we' and 'I' in the same letter.

### 4

#### Use words appropriate for the reader

When you are talking to your reader, say exactly what you mean, using the simplest words that fit. This does not necessarily mean only using simple words – just words that the reader will understand. Jargon is a type of language that is only understood by a particular group of people, such as an industry or a club. You can use jargon when writing to people who will understand the terms and phrases; it can be a useful form of shorthand. But try to avoid using specialist jargon on the general public. So in general, keep to everyday English whenever possible. And again, imagine talking to your reader across a table.

### 5

#### Avoid nominalisations

A nominalisation is a type of abstract noun. (Is that plain English?) In other words, it is the name of something that isn't a physical object but a process, technique or emotion.

Nominalisations are formed from verbs.

Verb
Complete
Introduce
Fail

Nominalisation
Completion
Introduction
Failure

The problem is that often they are used instead of the verbs they come from. And because they are merely the names of things, they sound as if nothing is actually happening in the sentence. Like passive verbs, too many of them make writing very dull and heavy-going. Here are some examples.

- We had a discussion about the matter.
- We discussed the matter.
  
- There will be a stoppage of trains by drivers.
- Drivers will stop the trains.
  
- The implementation of the method has been done by a team.
- A team has implemented the method.

## 6

### Use positive language

Always try to emphasise the positive side of things.

For example:

- If you don't send your payment, we won't be able to renew your membership of the scheme. (Negative)
- Please send your payment so that we can renew your membership of the scheme. (Positive)



**Use these six tips as a plain English checklist next time you are writing anything, and you will soon transform your writing. It's very easy to do, and will increase your readers ability to understand the message.**

**Start noticing ways to improve others work too. When uncertain, use the KISS principle - Keep IT Simple, Stupid!**

### Words to avoid

additional (extra)  
advise (tell)  
applicant (you)  
commence (start)  
complete (fill in)  
comply with (keep to)  
consequently (so)  
ensure (make sure)  
forward (send)  
in accordance with (under, keeping to)  
in excess of (more than)  
in respect of (for)  
in the event of (if)  
on receipt (when we/you get)  
on request (if you ask)  
particulars (details)  
per annum (a year)  
persons (people)  
prior to (before)  
purchase (buy)  
regarding (about)  
should you wish (if you wish)  
terminate (end)  
whilst (while)