

11

free tips

# How to write in plain English

BY TAMSIN CONSTABLE





# How to write in plain English

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Plain English means writing in a way that puts your readers first, so that they understand you straightaway. Plain English avoids jargon, corporate claptrap and anything else that could prevent your message from being clearly understood by your clients, colleagues, customers, service-users, staff, supporters, donors, funders etc. It's about effective, powerful writing.

Writing like this makes financial sense, too. Here's how plain English has helped other organisations save time, effort and money.

- Leeds City Council saved around £2 million by training its employees to use plain English (PR Week, June 2010)
- BT cut customer queries by 25% by using plain English for bills.
- Royal Mail saved £500,000 in nine months by re-doing a form in plain English.
- A UK government department saved £9 million by reviewing its forms.
- In Australia, lawyers read and understood a plain English version of a legal document in less than half the time it took to read the original.
- The US Navy estimated that plain English could save it \$250–\$300 million every year.

Plain English is not 'dumbing down'. Far from it: simple words can, in fact, communicate complex concepts elegantly and effectively because you have to think about getting your message across as clearly as possible. Plain English is about respecting your readers in such a way that you are always keeping them in mind when you write.

Most people can grasp the basics of clear, concise business writing. Forget about perfect grammar, classroom rules or clever word play ... it's simply a matter of following a few simple guidelines. The suggestions in this report offer some ideas about how to write more clearly.

I've written HOW TO WRITE IN PLAIN ENGLISH as a free resource to demonstrate how easy it is to boost the impact of your business writing. Please feel free to share this with anyone you think might find it helpful. You may not, however, sell, change or edit the content of this report in any way, and you must leave my byline intact.

## **Tamsin Constable**

PS – your readers will *really* appreciate it if you make sure all your business documents are in plain English.

# Tip 1 Keep it short

Cut out the waffle and make sure your writing says what you need it to say; no more, no less.

A long-winded piece of writing is less likely to be read than a short, concise piece. So get rid of any superfluous words or phrases.

## Let me show you what I mean

**Too long** *The quicker this is agreed and developed, the quicker both parties will feel comfortable and able to operate to their best potential and able to tap into the skills that each brings to the relationship.*

**Just right** *The quicker you agree this, the sooner you will both feel comfortable and able to work well together.*

**Too long** *The wedding caterers were absolutely furious about the situation.*

**Just right** *The caterers were furious.*

**Too long** *When this button is pressed the stop symbol is displayed at the top left-hand corner of the screen and the automatic page change is inhibited.*

**Just right** *When you press this button, the automatic page change will stop.*

# Tip 2 Be direct

Write with a real person in mind, using words such as 'we', 'us', 'our' and 'you'. This will encourage you to use what's called the 'imperative mood'.

I think of it as 'politely bossy writing'. The effect is that the reader feels you're speaking directly to them. I'm using the imperative for these tips.

## How about a few examples?

**Not direct enough** *Whoever is at reception should offer the guests complimentary refreshments upon arrival.*

**Being direct** *Offer guests complimentary refreshments as soon as they arrive.*

**Not direct enough** *Onions should be chopped and fried before adding the tomato sauce.*

**Being direct** *Chop and fry the onions, then add the tomato sauce.*

**Not direct enough** *After you have completed the form, the accounts manager should be sent a duplicate copy for their records.*

**Being direct** *When you've filled in the form, send a copy to the accounts manager.*

Tip  
3

# Write in user-friendly language

Just because your message is formal or official, it doesn't mean that your writing needs to be stiff and stuffy. Everyday language will get your point across just as well as well, if not better.

## Here's how to do it

**Too formal** *The third party's accountants have duly returned back to our offices stating that they have now increased to make up on their previous offer. I have returned back to them one final time in an attempt to negotiate an increase upon the same. I will return to you further in due course.*

**Just right** *The third party's accountants have increased their offer. I have written back one last time to try to negotiate more. I'll be in touch as soon as I hear from them.*

**Too formal** *We would like to apologise for any inconvenience experienced during these construction activities.*

**Just right** *Sorry for any trouble caused while we build the new station.*



# Use bullet points

Bullet points or numbered lines are a great way to cut down the amount of words you use, as well as making the text easier to read. If your paragraph is quite dense, and it includes a list of points, try breaking it into bullets.

## How about an example?

### Too dense

*Disaster happens and when it does you want all the help you can get. If you have a fire or flood you will have a lot to cope with. Continuity is important so we can help speed up the process of restoring your library while you get on with other things. We don't do insurance but can help you assess the damage for your claim. We will then bridge the gap with resources until your claim is settled. Finally we can help you, your pupils, staff and parents choose the new books and design the library.*

### Better with bullets

*If there's a flood, fire or some other disaster, we'll help you:*

- *work out what you've lost*
- *assess the damage for your insurance claim*
- *bridge the gap with resources until your claim is settled*
- *choose new books*
- *design and restore your library as soon as possible.*

Tip  
5

# One idea, one sentence

This forces you, as a writer, to work a little bit harder. You have to think carefully about the point you want to make before rushing something off in writing. If your thoughts are clear, your writing will be clearer, too.

You may have to re-order your sentences, but your readers will have the pleasure of being able to follow your point – even if it's a complex technical one – without having to re-read a long, rambling sentence. Include a second point only if it is relevant to the first one and doesn't make the sentence too unwieldy.

So go on... make friends with those full stops.

## Take a look at this example

**Too much**      *Our current top-management structure is too complex and confusing and leads to a loss of manufacturing efficiency because it takes a long time to make a decision and even longer to implement it.*

**Just right**      *Our top-management structure is too complex and confusing. It takes a long time to make a decision, and even longer to implement it. This leads to a loss of manufacturing efficiency.*

Tip  
6

# Identify mumbo-jumbo

One business person's clever catch-phrase is another's corporate claptrap. Keep an eye out for the latest trends, especially in internal communications, and you'll avoid making your readers cringe.

## Here are some examples

### What?

action it  
add value  
best practice  
let's run it up the flagpole and see how it flies  
we can't boil the ocean  
do you have any bandwidth to look at this?  
going forwards  
go for the low-hanging fruit  
are you on message?  
will you action that  
push the envelope  
deliverables

### Oh... I see

do it  
improve  
good examples of  
let's try it  
we can't do everything  
have you got time?  
in the future, from now  
do the easy stuff first  
do you understand?  
please do that  
try harder; take a risk  
results, objectives

Tip  
7

# Watch out for jargon

Jargon can be a useful short-hand for a particular group of people. Doctors, for example, will use medical jargon with other medics. The same goes for lawyers, who need specific legal terms.

But sometimes, there's no genuine technical reason for using a particular word or phrase. More often than not, plain English alternatives will do just as well (if not better). If professionals use jargon that's not strictly necessary, their writing can, at best, come across as intimidating or pretentious. At worst, it may be misunderstood.

So whatever your expertise, you should use in-house language with care. What's blindingly obvious to you may not seem so to your non-expert reader.

## Examples of medical jargon

### Huh?

*analgesia*  
*anti-coagulant*  
*radiograph*  
*congenital*  
*administer*  
*prognosis*  
*oesophagus*  
*enzyme*

### Ah, I see

*pain-killer*  
*drugs to stop blood clotting*  
*x-ray picture*  
*present at or just after birth*  
*give*  
*prediction about the outcome of an illness*  
*tube that goes from your mouth to your stomach*  
*protein that triggers chemical reactions*

Tip  
8

# Use short, simple words

Everyday words will get your message across more quickly and more effectively than longer, more complex words. Even if your readers have no difficulty with complex words, they will appreciate it if you take the trouble to explain a complex concept in straightforward language. Write naturally and you will come across as respectful and polite.

## Let me give you some examples

### Too long

endeavour  
implement  
commence  
discontinue  
purchase  
facilitate  
therefore  
however  
regarding  
currently

### Better

try  
carry out, do  
start  
stop, end  
buy  
help, make possible  
so  
but  
about  
now

Tip  
9

# Write mostly in the active voice

This is perhaps the single most powerful thing you can do to pack punch into your writing.

First, learn to recognise passive sentences. In these, the 'doer' (subject) comes after the action (verb). This allows the writer to be lazy because it offers the option of leaving the 'doer' out altogether, which can cause all sorts of misunderstandings.

Once you've noticed that you've written something in the passive voice, the next step is to see whether your sentence would be stronger in the active voice. In this, the 'doer' comes *before* the verb. So work out who – or what – is the 'doer', and move them (the subject) towards the front of the sentence.

## How to do this

### Don't write

*The extension arm should be fitted to the unit.  
The questionnaire should be returned by the students within five days.  
Every bun may be decorated with chocolate sprinkles.  
The recommendations of the personnel manager were accepted by the board.  
Mistakes were made.*

### Do write

*The technician should fit the extension arm to the unit.  
Students should return the questionnaire within five days.  
Children may decorate every bun with chocolate sprinkles.  
The board accepted the personnel manager's recommendations.  
We made mistakes.*

Tip  
10

# Spot verbs masquerading as nouns

If you write with verbs rather than nouns, your writing will instantly be stronger. Sloppy writing often resorts to words that come from verbs, such as: completion, introduction, decision, provision, failure, arrangement, investigation etc.

These can sound heavy and dull. Change them back into the verbs they came from (complete, introduce, decide, provide, fail, arrange, investigate) and re-write the sentence as necessary.

## Here are some examples?

- Don't write**      *The new job descriptions will help in the motivation of the staff.*
- Do write**         *The new job descriptions will help motivate the staff.*
- Don't write**      *Consultants recommended the reorganisation of the IT Department and the creation of four new posts.*
- Do write**         *Consultants recommended that we reorganise the IT Department and create four new posts.*
- Don't write**      *The presentation of results will be made, and the key problems highlighted, by Rachel.*
- Do write**         *Rachel will present the results and highlight key problems.*

Tip  
11

# And finally...

## Put yourself in your readers' shoes

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Re-read everything from their point of view. Because what it boils down to is this: will what you've written make sense...

...to them?

# About me

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I'm a Leeds-based writer, BBC-trained journalist and editor, and non-fiction author. As well as writing and editing, I also offer plain English training and consulting.

For more on powerful business writing, see my Plain English at Work blog ([www.tamsinconstable.com](http://www.tamsinconstable.com)) where I regularly post updates, news, anecdotes and tips on clear writing.

## **To get in touch about plain English editing or writing**

Email: [tamsin@tamsinconstable.com](mailto:tamsin@tamsinconstable.com)

Call: 07890 293 370 / 0113 322 9220

Write: 54 Elder Road, Leeds LS13 4BY

Twitter: [@tamsinconstable](https://twitter.com/tamsinconstable)