

Clear English

The goal of writing clear English is to produce information that the reader can understand the first time they read it.

As you do not always know who will be reading your information on the web, using clear English makes it more likely that readers will understand it immediately.

All our information should be jargon-free and as short and clear as possible.

We would all rather read something clear and short than try and battle through pages of waffle.

Clear English is not childish and it's not patronising. It simply means writing in a clear and friendly way and always keeping your reader in mind.

Writing clearly and effectively is a skill anyone can learn if you just take a bit of time.

Planning – the inverted pyramid style

Planning will reduce the time you spend revising your web page later and will also mean that:

- Your information follows a logical order
- You know what you need to write and where it needs to go
- You don't miss anything out.

There are several different methods for planning a document. One of these is the inverted pyramid style, also known as front-loading.

This technique is particularly important for web writing, where audiences have low attention spans and readers more often scan, rather than read, entire articles. Online writers use this technique for two important reasons: Firstly, so readers quickly decide whether or not to read the article and if they do decide not to, they can get all the key details from the initial scan. Secondly, having the best information and keywords close to the start of the page is good for search engine optimisation and for the reader.

Writing

Follow these guidelines when writing.

Know your audience - Identify who will be reading your work and keep them in mind as you write: are they experts or non-experts or a combination? Think about what they need to know. Keep your information short and to the point and let your readers know where they can find more detailed information if they want it.

Outside in (not inside out) - When you are writing for people outside your organisation you need to reverse your perspective. This requires more 'you' and less we, I or our department. Don't write 'We will teach you..' but instead write 'You will learn...'.
Get to the point - Use the title and introductory paragraph to say what the information is about, who it is for and why you are publishing it.

Use everyday words - Write in direct language using everyday words. Think about how you would explain the same information in a conversation; you will usually find that you use more natural and plain language when talking, and that's how you should write.

Avoid jargon and abbreviations - if you can when writing for people who are not familiar with your subject. Explain any technical terms you have to use. If you need to use an acronym or abbreviation always write it in full with the short version in brackets the first time it appears – Common Assessment Framework (CAF).

If only a specific group of people who are familiar with the technical terms will be reading your work, you probably won't need to explain everything. (But remember that even members of your target group may be new or may appreciate a reminder).

Glossaries are particularly useful in larger documents and are the best way to make sure that people who don't know the subject can understand technical terms.

Keep sentences and paragraphs short - It is good to have a mix of long and short sentences for variety and interest, but aim for an average sentence length of 15–20 words. When you've finished writing go through your document and edit out any unnecessary words:

- the proposal ~~that was received~~ from
- we are ~~in the process of~~ preparing a strategy document
- we are ~~currently~~ developing.

Use active verbs - Say 'we will do it' instead of 'it will be done by us'. The active voice is direct, inclusive and open.

Be friendly – Where it is possible try to write in the 'first person' and use personal pronouns, so say 'we will do this' instead of 'Ealing Council will do this'. It makes you sound more helpful and human.

Checking

Once you've written your document check it thoroughly for waffle and jargon. You may not be able to use all the methods listed here, but make sure that someone checks your information before you send it out.

Check the document yourself - the best way to do this is to read it out loud if you can!

Ask someone else to read it - this is a safeguard. It helps if they don't already know a lot about the subject, they can then tell you if it makes sense and if you've made the points in a logical order. They are likely to spot errors you have not noticed as the writer.

Use readability statistics - This is a function in word which gives your document a score based on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence.

Design

The way you present your information (the design or layout) is just as important as the words you use. Even if your words are clear no-one will read it if it looks cramped and unattractive. The main thing to remember with design is that 'less is more'.

Keep your page clean and simple. Some simple rules to follow are:

Left-align headers and text

Use sub headings and lists - to guide your reader and break up long pieces of text.

Use Arial 12 point font - an 11 point font is the minimum text size you should use.

Use images to illustrate your text – 'a picture paints a thousand words', but use them with caution: use images that are relevant. NB we have a wide range of images including photographs available in our EGfL image bank, please contact us for advice.

Use space to frame your information - A lot of white space makes your document easier to read and guides your reader through the text.

For more resources on writing clear English , visit the Plain English website:
<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>