

Communicate Clearly

A Guide to Plain English



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The terms used in this guide, especially those in the section on ‘Words and phrases to avoid’, are guides only and not legal definitions.

Some of the suggested words and phrases to use are reproduced from the United Kingdom Plain English Campaign’s ‘A–Z Guide of alternative words.’

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1. About this guide

This guide to plain English is for anyone who needs to communicate information to others and wants to do that as clearly as possible. It has been produced by 26TEN, a network of people and organisations working together to improve adult literacy and numeracy rates in Tasmania.

Writing and reading are a big part of how we communicate with each other. Many of us regularly send and receive important information through:

- emails
- letters
- signs
- job applications
- contracts
- reports
- policies
- instructions
- forms
- brochures
- websites
- newsletters
- speeches
- file notes for colleagues.

Plain English is a style of communication that studies have shown makes information easier to understand.¹

The guide brings together a set of plain English tips. The main section covers how to write and present information clearly. Towards the end is an index, a handy summary, examples of clearer words and phrases to use, checklists to help review documents and forms, and a list of extra resources.

While the guide is based on English grammar, you don't need to be an expert in grammar to be able to use it and write and speak in plain English.²

¹ For various studies, see these online resources, www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/grotsky.cfm, www.plainlanguage.gov/whyPL/benefits/bottomline.cfm, www.wordcentre.co.uk/page57.htm. Also see this book *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* by Joseph Kimble, Carolina Academic Press, 2012.

² If you would like to understand grammar better, there are good guides and courses available. See the extra resources in Appendix 5 or contact 26TEN for other suggestions.

What is 26TEN?

The name 26TEN comes from the 26 letters of the alphabet and the ten numbers from 0 to 9. It is Tasmania's way of talking about literacy (being able to read and write) and numeracy (being able to count and calculate numbers).

26TEN is a growing movement of people committed to improving Tasmania's adult literacy and numeracy rates. It came about as a result of the Tasmanian Government's Adult Literacy Action Plan 2010–2015, and the idea of having an informal community and workplace network of support.

The 26TEN network includes people from community organisations, businesses and all levels of government. Many private individuals are also involved as volunteers.³

Literacy and numeracy in Tasmania

One in every two Tasmanian adults has difficulties with the literacy and numeracy tasks that are part of everyday life – things like filling in forms, reading bills and bank statements, understanding safety signs at work, adding up at the supermarket, and reading instructions on everything from machinery to medications.⁴

Not all adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties are the same. Some may be better at numbers than spelling and some may be better at reading than writing. Some can read short pieces of writing, but find it hard to understand longer or detailed documents. Literacy and numeracy skills are like muscles. We need to use and update them regularly or they weaken.

The literacy and numeracy skills expected by society are changing all the time. Some of us may have left school confident about our skills, but changes in our workplaces and everyday life since then place new pressures on them.

³ See the last page of this guide for more information about 26TEN and how to get in touch with them.

⁴ Adult Literacy in Tasmania, 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics, published in 2008.

Writing and presenting information clearly

Being able to understand and act on a document the first time you read it is something we can all appreciate, no matter what our level of literacy. Just as important is spoken communication. Information that isn't presented clearly creates confusion. This can lead to missed opportunities, or mistakes and complaints that take time to sort out.

The 26TEN network wants to see plain English become the communication style of choice throughout Tasmania. We encourage you to become familiar with the guide, use it often and share it with others.

2. What is plain English?

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

When you use plain English you:

- write in clear language
- give relevant information in the right order
- help people find information quickly.

Plain English – before and after

To see the difference made by plain English, have a look at these ‘before’ and ‘after’ examples.

Before

The hospital patient has the right to information relevant to his situation that must allow the patient the fullest insight into all aspects of his situation, medical and otherwise, and, on an informed basis, enable him to make his own decisions or to participate in decisions which have implications for his or her wellbeing.

After

You have a right to information about your condition that helps you fully understand it and make informed choices about your treatment.

Before

Inhalation of vapour phase particulate matter chemical contaminants from biomass combustion in domestic settings is a significant contributor to local disease burden.

After

Household wood smoke causes local health problems.⁵

⁵ Plain English and science writing, Anne E Greene, *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*, www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/ganda/shopTalk/June-2013-Shop-Talk.html, viewed 22 September 2013

Sometimes people think plain English ‘dumbs down’ complex information, but this isn’t so. Plain English is about communicating to your reader or listener in language they understand, whether they are specialists, colleagues or members of the public.

Most people do not want to have to read material more than once to understand the message and decide what to do next. While complex language is sometimes necessary, most of the time plain English is more suitable.

What are the benefits of plain English?

- Plain English saves time and money, and avoids misunderstandings.
- It increases the chances that everyone will understand your message, including adults who have difficulty reading.
- It makes it easier for people to make informed judgements, including about their rights and responsibilities.
- The clarity it brings means people are more likely to use services. They will also feel more confident in the people providing them, which can mean fewer mistakes, complaints and unnecessary queries.
- Instructions in plain English are easier for staff to understand and follow.
- Clearly presented information shows respect and consideration for your reader, which can help build better relationships.

Examples of the practical and financial benefits of plain English

An Australian private health fund changed the wording of a letter about a premium rise and saved the company \$2 million in call centre costs over two years.⁶

A team in a US government department that handles unclaimed property rewrote 400 form letters into plain English. A year later, they had 18,000 fewer phone queries than the previous year. Staff processed more claims and also felt better about their jobs because they weren’t answering the same questions over and over.⁷

⁶ ‘An end to dead letter days’, Caitlin O’Toole, *Financial Review*, 9 May 2008.

⁷ US Government Plain Language website, www.plainlanguage.gov/whyp/benefits/bottomline.cfm, viewed 22 September 2013.

The plain English movement

Plain English is known in some places as plain language. There are plain language movements in many parts of the world, including the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Portugal, Mexico and the European Commission.

A simplified form of plain English known as Easy English is also being used more and more. Helpful for people with intellectual disabilities, low literacy or where English is not their first language, it uses images and icons to support text, large font sizes and lots of white space on the page.⁸

Getting started with plain English

As you start to work more and more with plain English, remember that just because it's easy to read doesn't mean it's always easy to write. It takes time and practice to do it well – but the rewards are great.

⁸ For more information about Easy English, see www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/toolkit-for-volunteer-organisations/manage-your-organisation/marketing-and-communications/using-plain-language-and-easy-english

3. Steps from start to finish

Here we have set out five steps that will take you from staring at a blank page to having a well-informed reader.

- Step 1 Think about your reader
- Step 2 Organise your information
- Step 3 Write your content
- Step 4 Check what you have written
- Step 5 Design and produce your document

Under each step are tips to help you improve written and spoken information. They are guidelines, not rules, and not all them will apply to every reader or every document. But using even some of them will take you a long way towards making your information more understandable.

Step 1 Think about your reader

Know who you are writing for and why

No matter what type of document you're writing, from a short email to a long report, it's important first to be clear about your reader.

- Who are you writing this document for?
- Why are you writing it?
- What action do you want them to take? Is there something you want them to do, think or feel as a result of reading or hearing it?
- Is there more than one reader or group of readers? If so, do you need to write separate documents?

For longer documents, you might find it useful to write a brief plan before you start.

Write for your reader

The first step in writing and speaking in plain English is to put yourself in your reader's shoes. Keep their interests in mind and ask the following questions when writing your document.

- How familiar are they with the words and terms you are likely to use?
- What subjects can you assume they understand?
- How will they read the document? Will they read it straight through or skip through to the sections that interest them?
- Will they need any background information?
- Do you need to explain any details they may not be familiar with?

Step 2 Organise your information

Use plenty of signposts

Table of contents

In a long document, a table of contents helps people to find the information they are particularly interested in.

Introductory paragraph

If a section of a document is very long, it is a good idea to include an introductory paragraph that summarises the contents.

Headings

Headings and sub-headings help people to work their way around a page. They also make the text less intimidating.

Dot-point lists

Use dot-points to break down complex text into lists. This guide includes plenty of examples of dot-points.

Use clear paragraphs

Limit each paragraph to one idea or topic. Try to keep their length between two and five sentences. Leave some white space between each paragraph and avoid continuing a paragraph over a page.

Keep documents as short as possible

Long documents can be hard work to read. Make sure every sentence you have written needs to be there. Often as you edit your work, you will see ways to tighten up the writing and present points more clearly. It's important to allow time for this. The tips on editing in Step 4 can help with this (see page 17).

Step 3 Write your content

Be personal

Use 'you', 'we' and 'I' in your documents. This will help you to imagine your reader and make the tone of your material warmer. It's easier for readers to engage with information when you address them directly.

Use everyday words

There's nothing wrong with long words, but there's no need to use them when short words will do. If you do need to use specialised language or jargon, make sure you explain what it means. At the back of this guide you'll find suggestions for shorter words to replace long ones (see pages 31–34).

Also watch out for buzzwords – words and phrases that become fashionable for a while – as they can put readers off. Some examples are '24/7' 'going forward' and 'driving change'. If you find yourself using buzzwords, pause and work out what you're really trying to say.

Keep sentences short

Long sentences, like long documents, can be hard work for your reader. While there are no strict rules about sentence length, try to keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words. You can vary the length with a mix of shorter and longer sentences, but try not to go over 25 words. Break up sentences with full stops rather than semi-colons, as people are more familiar with full stops.

Use the active voice

When we talk about the active voice, we mean the way the action word – the verb – is used in a sentence. Most sentences have three main parts: a **subject**, a **verb** and an *object*.

The **subject** is who or what is doing the action. The **verb** is the action. The *object* is who or what the action is being done to. An example is 'Jane wrote the report.' 'Jane' is the subject, 'wrote' is the verb, and 'the report' is the object.

The opposite of the active voice is the passive voice. This is when the object comes first and the subject last. The sentence above written in the passive voice would be 'The report was written by Jane'.

The active voice is clearer and livelier and comes across as more personal and direct. You also usually need fewer words to say the same thing, as in these examples.

Before	After
Sentences in the passive voice are written in this order:	Sentences in the active voice are written in this order:
<i>object</i> – verb – subject	subject – verb – <i>object</i>
For example:	For example:
<i>It will be done by us.</i>	We will do it.
<i>The match was won by Tasmania.</i>	Tasmania won the match.
<i>A decision on your application will be made by the panel.</i>	The panel will decide on your application.
<i>The building plans were approved by the Council.</i>	The Council approved the building plans.

Most sentences will have other words as well, but the subject, verb and object are nearly always there.⁹

⁹ There are some exceptions. If you are interested in this topic, you can find out more from grammar guides. See the Extra Resources section in Appendix 5.

Know when to use the passive voice

The passive voice puts a bit of distance between the person giving the information and the person receiving it. Sometimes it is appropriate to use it, such as when the active voice seems too harsh.

For example, 'We will close your account if you do not pay us today.' This is active, but it may be the wrong tone to use. In this case, you might prefer to use the passive voice and write, 'This account will be closed if it is not paid today.'

The passive voice is also useful when you don't know who the subject of the sentence is, or they aren't important to the topic, or you don't want to focus on them.

Because the passive voice can slow down your reader, you should use it only occasionally.

Avoid using nouns made from verbs

Nouns made from verbs are known as 'nominalisations'. Avoid these and instead try to make actions direct and strong. Some examples include 'consider' rather than 'consideration', 'establish' rather than 'establishment' and 'discuss' rather than 'discussion'.

Before	After
We gave consideration to four options.	We considered four options.
The retail company is working on the establishment of a new market.	The retail company is establishing a new market.
They will have a discussion about the new building tomorrow.	They will discuss the new building tomorrow.

Remove unnecessary words and phrases

Watch out for wording that bogs down your message, such as:

- Wordy phrases – using more words than you need to say something.
- Noun strings – groups of nouns joined together.
- Tautologies – two words that mean the same thing.
- Double negatives – two negative words where a single word will have the same effect.

Wordy phrases

Only use as many words as you need to get your message across clearly. Here are some examples, and you'll find more towards the end of this guide (see pages 31–34).

Before	After
in advance of	before
owing to the fact that	because
in the event that	if

Noun strings

The words in bold make up a noun string, also known as a noun stack. To fix these, sometimes you will need to make the sentence a little longer.

Before	After
This year the company is working on organisational employee capabilities .	This year the company is working on improving the skills of staff in the organisation.

Tautologies

Before	After
new innovation	innovation

Double negatives

Before	After
less unhealthy option	healthier option

Be consistent

Be consistent with any terms you use in your documents. For example, if you call something a review, use this term throughout your document. It can confuse your readers if you use the words evaluation, audit or study for the same thing.

Be specific

Rather than use abstract ideas, help your reader connect with something they know. Sometimes small details can give a better picture of what you are writing about. Again, keep in mind your reader and what knowledge of the subject they already have.

Before	After
A period of unfavourable conditions affected the farm's productivity.	Extended drought, falling wheat prices and rising water costs affected the farm's productivity.

Spell out acronyms

Acronyms are words formed from the first letters of other words. If you are using them in your document, spell them out the first time with the acronym in brackets, for example, Australian Research Council (ARC) or United Kingdom (UK).

Sometimes well-known organisations and businesses become better known by their acronym than their whole name. Examples include CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), TasCOSS (Tasmanian Council of Social Services) and the RACT (Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania).

When deciding which form to use, think about your reader and what will make sense to them. If you are using a lot of acronyms, it can be helpful to list their short and long forms in alphabetical order on a separate page.

Use questions and answers

Questions and answers are a good way to get information across or emphasise certain facts. They also mean people can go straight to the area that particularly interests them. Having a list of Frequently Asked Questions, or FAQs, is a common way of doing this.

An example of a FAQs list

Q. What does FAQs mean?

A. It is the abbreviation for Frequently Asked Questions.

Q. When might you use FAQs?

A. When you want to make information easy to find or when you want to emphasise certain facts.

Q. How long should a FAQs list be?

A. There are no rules, but longer than two pages can be hard work for your reader.

Step 4 Check what you have written

Edit carefully

There are three main stages of editing. The first two, structural editing and copyediting, are about improving the writing. The third one, proofreading, is about fixing errors (commonly known as ‘typos’) and tidying up the document.¹⁰

Structural (or substantive) editing

Here you are looking at the overall structure and shape of the document.

- Is the information set out in a logical order your reader can easily follow?
- Is everything your reader needs to know there?
- Does it include information your reader doesn’t need? If so, can you cut that?

Copyediting

Here you are looking at the sentences and words.

- Are your sentences as clear and direct as they can be?
- Have you used everyday words that your reader would be familiar with?
- Are all the words and phrases as concise as they can be?
- Have you been consistent in how you have spelt words and used terms?
- Is what you have written accurate?

Proofreading

This is about doing a final check for any errors or typos.

- Are all the words, names, addresses, emails and websites spelt right?
- Are all the numbers, including phone numbers, correct?
- Is the layout alright? Are the page breaks in the right place? Is everything that needs to be in the document in the right place?

Small pieces of writing, like short emails or file notes for colleagues, might need only proofreading. When proofreading larger documents, it is best to do this some time after you have finished writing it – at least an hour later or preferably 24 hours later. This way, you will see it with fresh eyes and be more likely to notice errors. If possible, ask someone else to proofread it too.

¹⁰ Summary based on *Style Manual: for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 6th edition, 2002, Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 256–261.

Use a house style guide

Most organisations have terms and phrases that they use often. It is useful to have a 'house style guide' where these are documented, so that everyone can easily check them. The guide can also include any useful writing or layout standards. Your house style can deal with specific points like these below.

Examples of what you can include in a house style guide

Your organisation's name

- How do you spell it?
- Do you use things like 'Incorporated' or 'Pty Ltd'?

Job titles

- Do they have capital letters?
- Are they up to date?

Acronyms

- When do you use the acronym for your organisation, for example, RACT for Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania?
- What other acronyms do you use?

Jargon

- What jargon will everyone you are writing for understand?
- What standard explanations will help those people who are unlikely to understand the jargon?

A simple way to set up a house style guide is to have a one page list of common words in alphabetical order. This is useful when you are working on a single document or if your organisation is small. You can include words that may be spelt, capitalised or hyphenated differently, such as ageing or aging, state government or State Government, and part-time or part time.

Test your document with readers

You should test your document to see that people will understand it quickly and easily. Even if it is an internal memo for a small number of staff, it is still worth asking people for their opinion.

People who know nothing about your area are sometimes the best at spotting unclear text. It is also worth testing your document with some of the people who are likely to use it.

Testing saves you money, time and energy in answering questions or in printing corrections later.

Use readability tools as a guide only

Readability tools are designed to give an idea of how difficult a piece of writing is to read. They measure syllables per word, words per sentence and sentences per paragraph, then work out the average and provide a rating. Some computers come with this already installed. There are also plain English software programs you can buy that assess extra aspects like unusual words, abbreviations, and clunky writing. Some also offer suggestions for how to simplify, cut and rewrite.

Treat them as broad guides only, as they do not consider the content of your document, your reader's needs or whether your document helps your reader find information quickly. People are the best judge of any document.

Step 5 Design and produce your document

Choose a readable font

If you use a computer, you will have access to a wide range of fonts (also known as typefaces). Fonts are generally grouped as 'serif' or 'sans serif'.

<p>Serif fonts have a small projection at the end of each stroke in a letter.</p>	Word
<p>Sans serif fonts don't have this projection. ('Sans' is French for 'without'.)</p>	Word

While there are no rules for which fonts to use, there are widely accepted practices. **Serif fonts** are considered better for printed documents where there is a lot of dense text to read, such as in lengthy reports. The serif example in the box above is Times Roman. **Sans serif fonts** are considered better for well-spaced text (like this document), headings and websites. The sans serif example above is Arial.

When selecting a font, especially for documents that will be read online, it's a good idea to check whether it is available on both Windows and Mac computers.¹¹ If you're not sure which fonts to use, experiment with these common ones: Times Roman and Georgia (serif), and Arial and Verdana (sans serif).

Avoid using more than two different fonts in a document, as this can be distracting for your reader.

Make the font large enough

For best results, use at least 12 point text because it is easy to read.

¹¹ For more information, see <http://web.mit.edu/jmorzins/www/fonts.html>, <http://www.3cstudios.com/WebsafeFonts.aspx>.

Make important points stand out clearly

When you want to emphasise a heading or a paragraph of text use a bigger size, **bold** or a different colour.

Don't use all capital letters (also called upper case) to make points stand out. AS YOU CAN SEE FROM THIS EXAMPLE, THEY CAN BE DIFFICULT TO READ AND MAKE IT SEEM THAT YOU ARE SHOUTING AT YOUR READER!

Use left aligned text

Left aligned text is where the content is lined up with the left margin of the page (like the text on this page). It is also known as ragged right text. This is the easiest to read for most documents.

Justified text is where the text is distributed evenly between the margins. Avoid justified text because it can lead to large gaps between words, which makes sentences difficult to read.

Justified text	Left aligned (or ragged right)
Try not to justify text, as this can lead to large gaps between words. It is best to use left aligned text. Also, be generous with your margins.	Try not to justify text, as this can lead to large gaps between words. It is best to use left aligned text. Also, be generous with your margins.

Images can help

Images, graphs and tables can complement and offer a break from large amounts of text. When you use them thoughtfully, they can be a great way to emphasise important facts and figures. Place them near the relevant text and make sure they genuinely help explain it. Remember your reader though. Some people are not familiar with graphs like pie charts and bar charts, and may not understand how they work.

Watch your line spacing

Line spacing refers to the amount of space from the bottom of one line of text to the bottom of the next line. Too little space and the reader will miss lines. Too much and the reader may be unsure if the lines of text refer to each other. You can adjust the line spacing in a Word document through the paragraph settings. The numbers in brackets in the examples below show the different line spacing used.

Too little (1.0 or single)

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

Suitable (1.15 spacing)

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

Also suitable (1.5 spacing)

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

Too much (2.0 or double spacing)

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

Avoid background images

Avoid using background images behind text. Many organisations use illustrations as a background image. This makes text harder to read, especially if the background image is very colourful.

Test your document on a number of people to see if they will understand it quickly and easily. Even if it is an internal email, it is worth asking people for their opinion.

Use good quality paper

Many types of paper are used for printing and each one reacts differently to ink. The best quality paper is 'uncoated'. Because of its surface, it takes ink well, which improves readability.

The other benefit of uncoated paper is that it does not reflect light. Documents printed on uncoated paper are easier to read because there is no glare from the page.

Have a good contrast

White or light cream paper usually makes your text most readable. But you can use a light coloured paper or a solid background colour to make your publication more colourful. For best results, make sure there is a strong contrast between the text and the background.

When you use light coloured text on a dark background, use a bold font. This helps prevent the problem of ink filling in parts of the letter. This happens most often with a serif typeface.



Watch out for shadowing

Make sure your paper is heavy enough to avoid images or text on one side of a page being seen through the paper. This is known as 'shadowing' and makes reading difficult. Standard office documents tend to be printed on paper weighing 80 gsm (grams per square metre). You may need a heavier weight if you have images that show through. Ask your paper supplier for advice, as some paper is more transparent than others.

Use colour and shading with care

Graphics and photographs that have big blocks of colour and shading use a lot of download and storage space on computers. They also need a lot of ink to print out. If you know your reader is likely to have a basic computer and printer, come up with a design that makes it affordable and easy for them to download and print.

4. Spreading the word

Making the shift to plain English will mean changing attitudes and old habits for many of us. It will take time, imagination and persistence, but the benefits are clear.

If you would like to see plain English being used in businesses, organisations and communities across Tasmania, add your voice to the growing number of people supporting this shift. Spread the word about plain English to family, friends and colleagues. Learn more about it through courses and books. Set up a practice group with others who are interested. If you receive confusing information from businesses or organisations, get in touch with them and suggest they rewrite it in plain English.

Print out this guide. Use it until it's worn out and falls apart, then get a new one. Pass on copies to everyone you know. Encourage young people around you to read it and use it – they'll be the ones making a difference for Tasmania in a decade or two. Finally, think about becoming a member of the 26TEN network and joining forces with the wonderful people already involved.

We can all help to make Tasmania a place where written and spoken information is easy to understand and act on – not just for a few, but for us all.

Lee Prince
Chair
26TEN Coalition



5. Appendices

In this section you will find some useful tools and other information.

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Appendix 1 A list of all the steps and tips

Step 1 Think about your reader

- Know who you are writing for and why
- Write for your reader

Step 2 Organise your content

- Use plenty of signposts
- Use clear paragraphs
- Keep documents as short as possible

Step 3 Write your content

- Be personal
- Use everyday words
- Keep sentences short
- Use the active voice
- Know when to use the passive voice
- Avoid using nouns made from verbs
- Remove unnecessary words and phrases
- Be consistent
- Be specific
- Spell out acronyms
- Use questions and answers

Step 4 Check what you have written

- Edit carefully
- Use a house style guide
- Test your document with readers
- Use readability tools as a guide only

Step 5 Design and produce your document

- Choose a readable font
- Make the font large enough
- Make important points stand out clearly
- Use left aligned text
- Images can help
- Watch your line spacing
- Avoid background images
- Use good quality paper
- Have a good contrast
- Watch out for shadowing
- Use colour and shading with care

Appendix 2 A handy summary

The following points are a condensed version of all the information in the guide. You might like to use this as a quick reference.

Think of the person reading your information

Make it clear who you are writing to or about by using 'I', 'we' and 'you' where you can.

Have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence

Keep sentences manageable. For variety, it is acceptable to mix longer, well-punctuated sentences with shorter, snappier ones.

Be direct and use the active voice most of the time

Try to put the person, group or thing doing the action at the start of the sentence as much as possible. For example, 'We will decide on your application soon' instead of 'A decision on your application will be made soon'.

Avoid unnecessary jargon

Aim to replace technical terms with their plainer alternatives. If you cannot do this, at least define the terms plainly.

Avoid using nouns made from verbs

Try to make actions concrete. For example, use 'consider' instead of 'consideration', 'establish' instead of 'establishment' and 'discuss' instead of 'discussion'.

Remove unnecessary words and phrases

Only use as many words as you need to get your message across clearly. For example, use 'before' instead of 'in advance of', 'because' instead of 'owing to the fact that' and 'if' instead of 'in the event that'.

Be consistent with terms

To avoid confusing your reader, use the same term for the same concept or thing throughout your document. For example, if you call something a standard, avoid later calling it a benchmark, a guideline or a norm.

Be specific with descriptions

Help your reader connect with something they know, rather than abstract ideas.

Define unfamiliar abbreviations and acronyms

As with technical terms, try to keep these to a minimum. If you suspect your reader might not be familiar with them, spell them out.

Avoid Latin and French expressions

Since people can confuse e.g., i.e. and etc., try to use the full, English equivalents 'for example', 'that is' and 'and so on' – or try rewriting your sentence. Similarly, use the English equivalent of phrases such as 'in lieu' and 'inter alia' to avoid confusion.

Check your work before you send it out

Make sure you edit your document carefully before sending it out. Sometimes it's a good idea to test it first, either with a colleague or one of your intended readers.

Use a clear, readable font

Use a clear font that will work well for your reader. Times Roman is a common serif font and Arial a common sans serif font. Aim for 12 point as standard size. Try not to have more than two distinct fonts in a document.

Break up dense text

Aim to use informative sub-headings, dot-point lists and question and answer formats to break up text and help your reader find their way through your document.

Emphasise text carefully

Only use bigger size font, bold or colour to emphasise text. Keep capital letters to a minimum to avoid SHOUTING AT YOUR READER! Avoid underlining and putting phrases in italics, as these types of formatting tend to make text harder to read.

Use left aligned text

Align your text to the left to avoid large gaps between words, which can happen when text is justified.

Use space to help your text stand out

Use 1.15 or 1.5 line spacing so the eye can move easily from one line to the next.

Use colour and images appropriately

If you use colour, make sure that it's easy on the eye and has a clear purpose. If using images, tables and charts, make sure they genuinely help explain the text. Avoid busy background images, which make text difficult to read.

Think about the final product for your reader

For published documents, use good quality paper. For electronic documents, avoid using graphics and photographs with big blocks of colour and shading where possible. These use up a lot of computer space when downloading and storing, and a lot of ink when printing.

Appendix 3 Words and phrases to use

Try to use everyday words as much as possible. In this part of the guide, you'll find alternatives to common complicated words and long-winded phrases.

26TEN is also developing alternative suggestions for medical, legal, financial and social terms that are more likely to be understood by non-specialist readers. In the meantime, Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency has some available on their website. Please note that some of their suggestions are intended to be broad alternatives rather than strict definitions or equivalents. See www.simplyput.ie/words_and_phrases_to_avoid.

Everyday words

Instead of	Consider
accompany	join, go with
alternatively	or
ascertain	find out
audit	review, check
avail of	take up, take
benchmark	standard
beneficial	helpful, useful
biannually	twice a year
biennially	every two years
calculate	work out
cease	end, finish
commence	start, begin
confiscate	take from
consequently	so
constitute	make up, form
demonstrate	show
determine	check, work out
disseminate	share, spread
endeavour	try
eventuality	situation

Everyday words (continued)

Instead of	Consider
facilitate	make easier, help, enable
fundamental	basic
herewith	with
in lieu of	instead of
incremental	gradual, little by little
inter alia	among other things
interim	temporary, meantime, for now
irrespective	regardless
locality	place
modification	change, alteration
operational	working
optimum	best, greatest, most
participate	take part
particulars	details
persons	people
quarterly	every three months
is resident, residing	living
terminate	end, finish
utilise	use

Concise words

Instead of	Consider
adequate number of	enough
adjacent to	beside, next to
as a result of, due to the fact that	because
at the present time	now, currently
by means of	by, with
come to the conclusion	conclude
draw to your attention	point out, show
during the course of	while
excessive number of	too many
for the duration of	during, until the end
for the purpose of	to
give an indication	indicate, signal
give consideration to	consider, think about
hold discussions, hold meetings	discuss, meet
in conjunction with	with
in possession of	have, own
in proximity to	near, close to
in receipt of	receiving, getting
in reference to	about
in respect of	about, for

Concise words (continued)

Instead of	Consider
in the course of	during, while
in the event that	if
In the absence of	without
in view of the fact that	since, because
it would appear that	apparently
large proportion of	many
make an application	apply
not in a position to	unable to
notwithstanding the fact that	despite, even if, however
not later than	by, on or before
on a daily basis	daily, every day
on behalf of	by, for
on condition that	if
on the part of	by
provided that	if, as long as
subsequent to	after
sufficient number of	enough
take exception to	disagree with, object to
under the provisions of	under
until such time that	until
with regard to	about

Appendix 4 Checklists

Checklist for documents

This checklist offers a quick way for you to review a letter, leaflet, booklet or short report to see if it uses plain English and is easy to follow. Not all questions will apply to every document, but try to answer 'yes' as much as possible to the questions that do apply.

	Yes	No
Language, punctuation and grammar		
1. Does the document use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Does it use the active voice most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Does it keep technical terms and abbreviations to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does it define any necessary terms and abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does it keep jargon to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Does it use the same term for the same concept throughout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Does it have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Does it use correct punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structure		
1. Does it organise information according to the reader's needs and interests?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Does it use informative headings or questions to break up text?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Are paragraphs relatively short?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does it use dot-point lists for detailed or complicated information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Page design		
1. Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Is text in a readable font, aligned to the left and 1.15 or 1.5 spaced?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Are any images, tables and charts clear and placed close to the text?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Checklist for forms

This checklist offers a quick way for you to review a form to see whether it uses clear language and is easy to follow. Not all questions will apply to every form, but try to answer 'yes' as much as possible to the questions that do apply.

	Yes	No
Language, punctuation and grammar		
1. Does the form use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Are most questions in the active voice?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Are questions written clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does the form define any specialised terms or abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Do similar questions use similar words and punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Are questions punctuated correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structure		
1. Does the form include clear instructions at the start?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Are any 'official use only' sections placed near the end of the form?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Does the form ask questions in a logical order?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does it avoid unnecessary or repeated questions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does it group similar questions together under useful headings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Does it keep numbering as simple as possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Page design		
1. Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Does it use a font that is easy to read?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Is it clear where to give answers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Is there enough space for answers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does the form use tick-the-box questions where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix 5 Extra resources

If you would like to learn more about plain English or grammar, these online and print resources are a good starting point.

Plain English

Online

- Simply Put, the plain English website of Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) www.simplyput.ie.
- The Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN), an international association set up to promote clear communication in any language www.plainlanguagenetwork.org.
- The Plain English campaign, the United Kingdom-based plain English organisation www.plainenglish.co.uk.
- Plain Language.gov, a United States federal government initiative to improve communication between government and the public www.plainlanguage.gov.

Print

- *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* by Joseph Kimble, Carolina Academic Press, 2012.

Grammar

Online

- Oxford Dictionaries Online – Better Writing site.
www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/better-writing.
- Oxford Practice Grammar site, where you can do a test to check your grammar skills.
<https://elt.oup.com/student/practicegrammar/?cc=global&sellLanguage=en>.
- Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tips. An American site written in an easy to read style www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl.

Print

- *Style Manual: For authors, editors and printers*, 6th edition, John Wiley & Sons, Canberra, 2002. This is the Australian Government's style manual and includes chapters on grammar.
- *Oxford Essential Guide to Writing* by Thomas S Kane, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- *English for the Natives* by Harry Ritchie, Hodder & Stoughton, 2013.
- *Penguin Guide to Punctuation* by R L Trask, Penguin Books, 1997. Although British, the punctuation style is similar to the Australian Style Manual. It is also available online www.informatics.sussex.ac.uk/departments/docs/punctuation/node00.html.

Your notes

About 26TEN

26TEN is a network of people and organisations working together to improve literacy and numeracy rates in Tasmania.

Our services include:

- a **members program** to help build the 26TEN network and make programs available more widely
- **literacy** workshops to raise awareness and understanding
- **plain English** workshops to help people improve the quality of information they offer to the public, and to customers, users and staff of organisations
- a **free telephone service** to provide advice and information
- the 26TEN **website** to share information
- a **grants program** to fund projects that improve literacy skills in workplaces and communities.

We work with:

- local councils
- government departments
- private businesses and companies
- education and training organisations
- community groups.

For more information, please contact us.

Freecall 1300 002 610

Email email@26ten.tas.gov.au

Website www.26ten.tas.gov.au

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