

Write plainly



Impress with your thinking, not your language



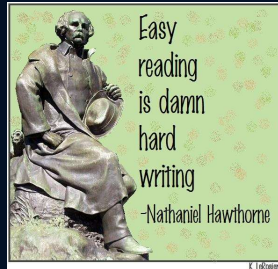
The curse of knowledge



You know it so
well you can't
imagine people
not knowing



A good writer works hard so the reader doesn't have to



"If something is well written the reader will be able to give his whole attention to what the writer is saying. But he will not be able to if it is badly written, because some of his attention will be taken up with sorting out the muddle. A good writer sorts out his own muddles. He considers his readers. He remembers that they are giving him their attention, and he is careful not to waste any of it."



O.M. Thomson

Plain language

Organising and presenting information so that it makes sense to your audience and is easy for them to read.


You must know your audience well to be able to do this



Plain language is a relative term.
Your document is in plain language when your target audience understands it.
Material is in plain language if your audience can:


- Find what they need;
- Understand what they find; and
- Use what they find to meet their needs.

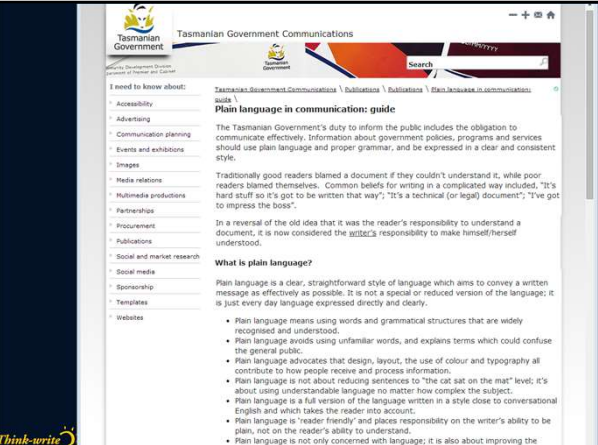
The Canadian Public Health Association



"our rule of thumb is that if a clear meaning does not present itself to us on the first reading of a clause, something must be wrong."

Phillips Fox





Tasmanian Government Communications

Tasmanian Government Communications | Publications | Publications | Plain language in communication: guide

Plain language in communication: guide

The Tasmanian Government's duty to inform the public includes the obligation to communicate effectively. Information about government policies, programs and services should use plain language and proper grammar, and be expressed in a clear and consistent style.


Traditionally good readers blamed a document if they couldn't understand it, while poor readers blamed themselves. Common beliefs for writing in a complicated way included, "It's hard stuff so it's got to be written that way", "It's a technical (or legal) document", "I've got to impress the boss".

In a reversal of the old idea that it was the reader's responsibility to understand a document, it is now considered the **writer's** responsibility to make himself/herself understood.

What is plain language?

Plain language is a clear, straightforward style of language which aims to convey a written message as effectively as possible. It is not a special or reduced version of the language; it is just every day language expressed directly and clearly.

- Plain language means using words and grammatical structures that are widely recognised and understood.
- Plain language avoids using unfamiliar words, and explains terms which could confuse the general public.
- Plain language advocates that design, layout, the use of colour and typography all contribute to how people receive and process information.
- Plain language is not about reducing sentences to "the cat sat on the mat" level; it's about using understandable language no matter how complex the subject.
- Plain language is a full version of the language written in a style close to conversational English and which takes the reader into account.
- Plain language is 'reader friendly' and places responsibility on the writer's ability to be plain, not on the reader's ability to understand.
- Plain language is not only concerned with language; it is also about improving the organisation of written material and the way it is presented.



Why use plain language?

Generally public servants have two main reasons for communicating with their audiences: to give information and to get information.

To succeed we must ensure that our messages do not confuse our readers or conceal information. If our audiences cannot follow legal documents, information leaflets or letters, there is the risk of their breaking the law, or failing to do what is expected of them or receiving what is rightfully theirs.

It is not enough for writers just to get the facts right. Documents must be complete, accurate and use language their audience(s) can understand.

What are the benefits of plain language?


The benefits of plain language are both real and intangible in terms of time and cost savings and improved public relations.

- Plain language gets your message across in the shortest time possible.
- More people will be able to understand your message.
- There is less chance that your document will be misunderstood, so less time is spent in time-consuming explanations.
- Plain language is socially responsible.

Writing in plain language


Documents, pamphlets, brochures etc should be understandable at the first reading and not require 'translation'. To make your documents reader-friendly:

- know your audience (i.e. keep in mind the average reader's level of English)
- use standard, familiar language (no 'jargon')
- keep sentences short (an average of 15-20 words)
- keep paragraphs short.
- use personal pronouns (eg 'you') to speak directly to readers.
- use positives rather than negatives ('Leave the equipment up' rather than 'Do not dismantle the equipment').
- make sure the message is clear, accurate and concise (i.e. the document isn't overloaded with superfluous information)
- avoid clichés, jargon (eg re-engineering for redesigning) or technical language and overuse of abbreviations and acronyms (if used, write them out in full the first time they are used in the document)
- use the active voice (people tend to respond because it is more direct and requires action)
- use a friendly, courteous and businesslike tone.
- include only one idea or issue in a paragraph or in the same sentence.
- present information in a logical order.
- be mindful of good layout and design.



Plain Language

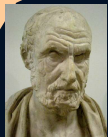

1. Simple words
2. Active voice
3. Verbs not nouns
4. Short, point-first, sentences
5. Conversational



1. Simple words

The chief virtue that language can have is clearness; and nothing distracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words.

Hippocrates

When you come right down to it, there is no law that says you have to use big words when you write or talk.

There are lots of small words, and good ones, that can be made to say all the things you want to say, quite as well as the big ones. It may take a bit more time to find them at first, but it can be well worth it. For all of us know what they mean.

Some small words, more than you might think, are rich with the right feel, the right taste, as if made to help you say the thing the way it should be said.

Small words can be crisp, or sharp, or brief, or terse. They go straight to the point. Small words can dance, or twist, or turn, or sing, with a charm all their own. They are the grace notes of prose. You know what they say the way you know a day is bright and fair - at first sight.

And you find, as you read or as you hear, that you like the way small words can catch large thoughts and hold them up for all to see and hear.

They are like rare stones in rings of gold, or joy in the eyes of a child. Small words can make you feel, as well as see; the cold deep dark of night, or the hot salt sting of tears.

Big words can bog down and get in the way of what you want to say. Small words move with ease to say what you mean. For those who teach, and for those who learn, small words are links in the chain. There is not much, in all our work, that small words will not say - and say well.

Think

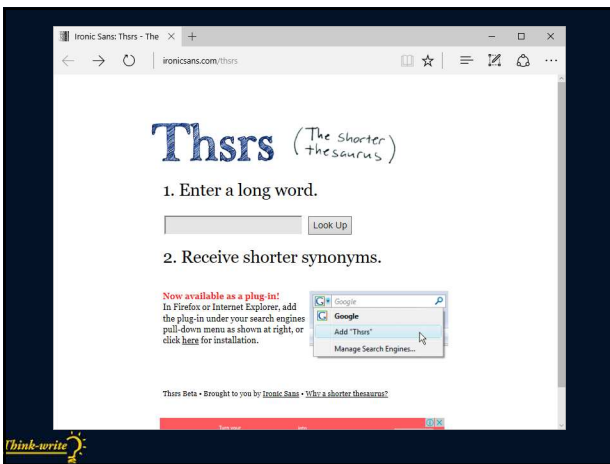
Workbook exercise

Think-write

abandon	leave, stop
fundamental	key, basic, chief, main, core
abolish	stop, ban, end
illustrate	show, draw
accomplish	do, achieve
indicate	show, point out
accumulate	add up, gather
institute	start, begin, put in place
adequate	enough
liquidate	sell, close down
beneficial	good, helpful
utilise	use
characteristic	style, feature, trait
neutralise	cancel, prevent
commitment	promise, pledge
objective	goal, aim
compensation	pay, trade-off
obligate	must, require

Think-write

component	part
participate	take part in
demonstrate	show
proportion	part, share
discontinue	stop, end
regulation	law, rule
encounter	come across, meet
remittance	payment
endeavour	try
repudiate	deny, reject
enumerate	number, count, list
severance	cut off
expedite	speed up, hasten
subsequent	after, next, later, following
fabricate	make, lie
terminate	stop, end
fluctuate	vary
verify	check, agree with



Conditional statements

Use 'if/then'

not	where	where the tenant fails to pay their rent...
	should	should the data be replaced by
	in the event	the data should be replaced by

Where the vehicle has significant structural damage it must be written-off.

If the vehicle has significant structural damage, it must be written-off.



Should you find a hole, fill it.

if you find a hole, fill it.



Start the condition with 'if'.

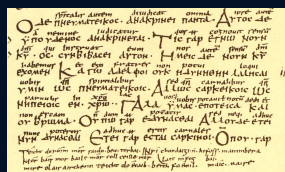
If it is raining

Take an umbrella if it is raining .



Cut the clutter

More words than necessary can clutter communication



It is important that we examine the future implications of merging these departments together.

We must examine the implications of merging these departments.



To provide an indicative view of the expected implementation costs for the High Performance Delivery Pipeline, an order of magnitude cost estimate relating to the delivery pipeline transformation of Kana is outlined in the table below:

Solution	Cost range
Implement a High Performance Delivery Pipeline for Kana	\$2.0m – \$3.0m
Total costs	\$2.0m – \$3.0m

We estimate it will cost \$2m-3m to implement Kana in the High Performance Delivery Pipeline.



Every sentence, every phrase, every word has to fight for its life.

Crawford Kilian, Writing for the Web



Workbook exercise



due to the fact that	because
made up his mind	decided
prior to, in advance of	before
best of health	healthy
on the part of	for
with the exception of	except
the absence of	without
the question as to whether	question
draw your attention to	show
in order to	to, so
filled to capacity	full
in spite of the fact	despite
the month of May	May
put in an appearance	appear, show
at this time	now
in short supply	rare



in the majority of instances	usually, mostly
a percentage of	part
did not remember	forgot
ahead of schedule	early
great majority	majority
for this reason	reason, because
in close proximity	near
personally reviewed	reviewed
serious crisis	crisis
subject matter	subject
contingent upon	depends
a number of	some
bring to a conclusion	conclude
connected together	connected



end result	result
in the direction of	towards
in the foreseeable future	soon
advanced warning	warning
not in a position to	can't
a small number of	few
enclosed herewith	enclosed
without further delay	now
time of day	time
mutual cooperation	cooperation
merged together	merged

think-write

at a later date	later
ask the question	ask
general public	public
plan in advance	plan
desirable benefits	benefits
breakdown situation	breakdown
full and complete	complete
circulate around	circulate
first and foremost	first
in this day and age	now
brown in colour	brown
regular weekly meetings	weekly meetings
on a daily basis	daily

think-write

2. Prefer the active voice

Active voice

Agent	Verb	Object
↓	↓	↓
Jack	kicked	the ball

Passive voice

Object	Verb	Agent
↓	↓	↓
The ball	was kicked	by Jack

think-write

Active voice

generally shorter

Jack kicked the ball
+50%
The ball was kicked by Jack

information in a natural order

identifies agent

The ball was kicked

more direct – even forceful



The budget was approved by the board

The board approved the budget




A full report of the incident will be prepared by Kate

Kate will prepare a full report of the incident



Your estimates will be checked
by the budget department

The budget department will
check your estimates






U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services




But passive is not wrong

- to make less hostile:
'this bill has not been paid' rather than
'you have not paid the bill'
- to avoid taking blame:
'a mistake was made' rather than
'we made a mistake'
- when you don't know the agent or the
agent is unimportant:
'the car was stolen' rather than
'someone stole the car'




Rewrite exercise




E-mail is being used to inform staff employed by the Commission concerning the strategy being adopted under MAP 2010.

The commission will use email to tell staff about the strategy being adopted under MAP 2010.



A decision has been taken by the board that a reduction should be effected in the salaries paid by the Commission to its officials.

The board has decided to reduce the salaries the Commission pays to its officials.



3. Use verbs not nouns

Verbs

- are generally shorter
- emphasise action



The negotiators are in agreement...

The negotiators **agreed**...



We will be conducting an investigation...

We will **investigate**...



The committee has formed a conclusion...

The committee **concluded**...



Timely cultivation achieved the eradication of Paterson's curse

Timely cultivation **eradicated** Paterson's curse.



make a recommendation	recommend
formulate an argument	argue
raise an objection	object
arrive at a conclusion	conclude
perform an analysis	analyse
develop a plan	plan
exercise conformity	conform
undertake a development	develop
find a solution	solve
make a decision	decide




Familiarity breeds contempt.
Contempt is bred by familiarity.
The breeding of contempt ____ by familiarity.
The breeding of contempt is accomplished by familiarity.
Accomplishment of the breeding of contempt _____ by familiarity.
Accomplishment of the breeding of contempt is achieved by familiarity.
Accomplishment of the breeding of contempt is currently in the process of being achieved by familiarity.



Avoid noun strings

Underground mine worker safety protection procedures


Procedures to protect the safety of workers in underground mines



Avoid noun strings

Draft laboratory animal rights protection regulations

Draft regulations to protect the rights of laboratory animals



National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's automobile seat belt interlock rule

The interlock rule applied to automotive seat belts by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration



Avoid long strings of nouns

Write functional descriptions using verbs



Development flight instrumentation recorders

Instruments to record development flights

Agency management planning system enhancements

Planning systems to enhance agency management

Surface water quality protection procedures development

Developing procedures to protect surface water quality



Workbook exercise



Through the introduction of measures aimed at the creation of employment, it is the intention of the Commission to facilitate the positive evolution of the economic and social situation.

The commission will introduce measures to create jobs to improve the economy and the community.



A request will be made to a firm of consultants to carry out an evaluation of the resources needed to ensure the feasibility of the performance of these tasks by the research centre.

We will request consultants to evaluate the resources needed so that the research centre can perform these tasks.



Clearing of native vegetation, with the associated destruction of habitat, has been identified as the process that represents the greatest single threat to biodiversity in NSW.

Clearing native vegetation and destroying habitat is the greatest threat to biodiversity in NSW.



XYZ has responsibility for implementation and evaluation of the compliance and enforcement strategy.

XYZ is responsible for implementing and evaluating the compliance and enforcement strategy.



Strategic investigations and prosecutions will be undertaken to demonstrate to illegal operators that the Food Authority is committed to identifying and prosecuting serious non-compliant behaviours.

The Food Authority will investigate and prosecute illegal operators to demonstrate our commitment to correcting serious non-compliant behaviours.



4. Short, single point sentences

- One thought per sentence
- Point first
- Use verbs – the most powerful one that fits
- Be specific
- Average 15-20 words. But with variety



One thought, one sentence

A single 'chunk' or 'bite' of content.

Sentences ... should be short and should have unity of thought.

Sir Earnest Gowers



Look for joining words:

- and
- but
- so
- because
- then
- until
- such as

Look for multiple embedded clauses – lots of commas.

Average sentence length: 20-25 words. But with variety.



Workbook exercise



The objective of this policy is to create and establish management standards for all assets under the management and control of Council to a reasonably safe standard and condition which is, in fact, the highest standard and condition that Council has determined it can reasonably afford in all of its circumstances and having regard to all of its statutory obligations and financial, economic, environmental, aesthetic, social or political factors or constraints.

This policy establishes standards for all assets under the control of council. The standards will be a reasonably safe condition – the highest standard and condition that council can reasonably afford. Council has determined these standards after considering all of its circumstances including its statutory obligations and financial, economic, environmental, aesthetic, social and political factors or constraints.



THAT in the absence of an agreed sale price reached within fourteen (14) days of the date of these orders, the price nominated as the fair market value by a valuer appointed by the President for the time being of the New South Wales Division of Australian Institute of Valuers and Land Administrators (Incorporated) ("the valuer"), the costs of and incidental to such appointment and valuation to be borne equally by the parties as and when they fall due.



Multiple thoughts in a sentence

- OK when thoughts are closely related
- cause and consequence, logical flow
 - contrasting ideas
 - amplifying ideas

OK for style and pleasurable reading.

One thought, one sentence – unless you have a reason for more.



Point first

To make more of these courses available to potential bike riders in NSW, DECC is offering Cycling Training Vouchers in partnership with AustCycle.

DECC is offering Cycling Training Vouchers in partnership with AustCycle to make more of these courses available to potential bike riders in NSW.



While there will be an ongoing key role for species-specific plans to bring high profile species back from the brink of extinction, most recovery outcomes depend on integrating the necessary protective actions with the mainstream processes that decide the fate of habitat.

Most recovery outcomes depend on integrating the protective actions with the mainstream processes that decide the fate of habitat. However, there will be an ongoing role for species-specific plans to bring high profile species back from the brink of extinction.



Point first in sentences – subtle yet powerful



Specific content

A period of unfavourable weather set in

It rained every day for a week



After recognizing some problems with the solar mirrors, we took subsequent corrective measures.

After finding that high winds (and not hail) had cracked the ten solar mirrors, we began stowing all mirrors in a vertical position during thunderstorms.



Use the same form

Mary likes *hiking*, *swimming*, and *to ride* a bicycle.

Mary likes *hiking*, *swimming*, and *riding* a bicycle.



The objectives of the Viking mission were to obtain high-resolution images of the Martian surface, characterize the structure and composition of the atmosphere and surface, and to search for evidence of life.

The objectives of the Viking mission were to:

- obtain high-resolution images of the Martian surface,
- characterize the structure and composition of the atmosphere and surface, and
- search for evidence of life.



- One thought per sentence, one idea per paragraph
- Point first – in both sentences and paragraphs
- Use verbs – the most powerful one that fits
- Be specific
- Average 15-20 words per sentence, about 4-6 sentences per paragraph. But with variety.



5. Conversational style

Write as though the person is physically in the room with you

Don't write to a crowd, write to a person.



Use personal pronouns:

- We
- You
- I
- Us
- Them

(but be clear about where the communication coming from)



Conversations (and documents) happen in the context of relationship.

Use a tone and style appropriate to the relationship – and the future of the relationship.



Health effects from indoor air pollutants may be experienced soon after exposure or, possibly, years later. The likelihood of immediate reactions to indoor air pollutants depends on several factors. Age and pre-existing medical conditions are two important influences. In other cases, whether a person reacts to a pollutant depends on individual sensitivity.



Whether or not your health will be effected by indoor pollution depends on your individual sensitivity to pollutants, your age and any medical conditions you already have. Consult your doctor if you feel unwell.

Immediate effects will be dependant on the pollutant but may include symptoms such as irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat, headaches, dizziness and fatigue. Such immediate effects are usually short-term and treatable. Moving outdoors is one possible action. Longer term effects may include some form of respiratory disease or heart disease and can be severely debilitating. Anyone who feels they have been affected by poor indoor air quality should consult their doctor.



Sometimes you may feel unwell soon after being exposed to the pollution, other health effects may take years to develop. Headaches, dizziness, fatigue and irritations to the eyes, nose or throat caused by indoor pollution are usually short term and may be fixed by simply going outside. Longer term health effects may include respiratory and heart problems and so require medical attention.

You must send us

is better than

Applicants must send us



You can get advice from
is better than
Advice is available from



We will consider your application
is better than
Your application will be considered



This return form must be signed by the licence holder. Even if help is received in the completion of the form, the licence holder must sign it and lodge it with this office. Once the return has assessed, the licence holder will be sent a notice of assessment. Staff at the Department are available for consultation should further explanation be necessary.

If you are the licence holder you must sign this form even if you get help from someone else to complete it. The Department will send you a 'notice of assessment' after we assess your form. Call our staff if you need any help completing the form.



Plain language principles

1. Familiar words
2. Active voice
3. Verbs not nouns
4. Point first, single point sentences
5. Conversational style