

FACTSHEET – Plain English

Modified from the original course by the Plain English Campaign

How to write reports in plain English

Introduction

Welcome to the plain English report-writing course. All you need is a pen, some paper, a little time and the will to learn.

There is no great mystery about writing clear, concise and effective reports. The writing skills you will learn in this factsheet will work in all types of 'business' writing - letters, leaflets, memos and so on. What makes reports different is the formal way they are organised, we cover that in detail in the factsheet on the report itself.

All the examples are genuine. The answers to all the exercises are at the end of the guide. At the end of the course is a list of common bureaucratic words with plain English alternatives.

Plain English?

First let's say what plain English isn't and destroy some of the myths about it.

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.

Sadly, thanks to the bureaucrats of public service industries, local councils, banks, building societies, insurance companies and government departments, we have learned to accept an official style of writing that is inefficient, unfriendly and often ugly. But in the last few years, many of these offenders have started to put things right, either rewriting their documents clearly or training their staff in the art of plain English or both. If you spend more than an hour a day writing, you are (to an extent) a professional writer. So it's vital that you get it right.

The advantages of plain English are:

- ◆ it is faster to write
- ◆ it is faster to read
- ◆ you get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way

The *Plain English Campaign* has led the way in the field of clear communication. The Campaign edits and designs documents for the country's largest organisations and runs hundreds of training courses every year. Now Plain English Campaign has used all their experience to put together this teach-yourself course on writing reports in plain English.

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.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

Keep your sentences short

We're not going to join in the argument about 'what is a sentence?'. Just think of it as a complete statement that can stand by itself. Most experts agree that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15-20 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.

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

Exercise 1

Here are some examples. Split them where suitable by putting in full stops. You may need to put in or take out words so that the new sentences will make sense. But don't change anything else.

1. From a formal report of a disciplinary interview:

I raised your difficulty about arriving ready for work on time and pointed out that your managers had done their best to take account of your travel problems and you had agreed with them that the Green Lane depot was the most convenient place for you to work, however, your initial improvement was short-lived and over the past two months your punctuality has dropped to a totally unacceptable level.

2. From an electricity company:

I do not seem to have received the information required from you to set up your budget scheme, and I now enclose the relevant form and ask that you fill it in and return it.

3. From a solicitor:

If you could let me have the latest typed version of the form in the next seven days, whereupon I suggest we meet here on 19 December to finalise the text so that you could then give me an estimate of the cost of producing a typeset proof.

4. From a credit company:

I refer to the earlier notice served in respect of your account as the arrears now amount to the sum shown above, you leave me with no alternative than to commence court action and details of your account have been referred to the company's solicitor.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

Actives and passives

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

Well, this is where we have to get grammatical. Most people know that a verb is a 'doing' word, like 'make', 'do', 'play', 'talk' or 'write'. There are many ways to split verbs into different categories, but we're just going to consider the difference between active and passive verbs. Passive verbs make writing duller and harder to understand. Active verbs make writing livelier and more personal.

But what are active and passive verbs? Let's take a simple sentence: 'The boss slammed the door.' Here, we can call the boss 'the doer'. The verb is 'slammed'. And the door is what we can call 'the thing'.

In almost all sentences that contain active verbs, the doer comes first, then the verb and then the thing. There will probably be lots of other words as well. For example: 'The boss, in a fit of temper, slammed the door to the outer office.' But the order of doer, verb, thing stays the same.

With passive verbs, the thing comes first: 'The door was slammed by the boss.' You can see that by making the sentence passive, we have had to introduce the words 'was' and 'by', which means the sentence is now much clumsier.

Remember that the doer is not always a person and the thing is not always a thing! 'The tree crushed Peter' is active but 'Peter was crushed by the tree' is passive. And remember 'passive' has nothing to do with the past tense.

Here are some more examples of sentences containing passive verbs. Our 'active' versions are underneath each one.

- ❖ The matter will be considered by us shortly. (We will consider the matter shortly.)
- ❖ The riot was stopped by the police. (The police stopped the riot.)
- ❖ The mine had to be closed by the safety inspector. (The safety inspector had to close the mine.)

Sometimes the doer gets left out. Sentences with passive verbs can make sense without having a doer. For instance, 'the door was slammed', 'the cheque had been cashed' and 'the report is being written' all leave out the doer. People used to 'officialise' often write reports that are full of passive verbs, with sentences like these.

(Passive) 35 sites were visited in three weeks. Procedures were being properly followed at the sites visited. Overheads were not kept under control despite an awareness of the budgetary situation. Neither of these sentences has a doer. So the reader may be left asking, 'Who visited the sites?', 'Who was following procedures properly?' and so on. Changing to active verbs reveals the 'doers' and sharpens up dull and unclear sentences.

(Active) We visited 35 sites in three weeks. At the sites we visited, we found that staff were following procedures properly. Managers were not keeping overheads under control, despite knowing about the budgetary situation. You will notice that in the last sentence we have used an active verb instead of 'an awareness of'. As we shall see later this is an example of changing a 'nominalisation' into a verb.

Spotting passives – There is another way of spotting passive verbs which is especially useful when the doer isn't mentioned in the sentence.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

- ❖ First, passive verbs almost always have one of the following words added on - be, being, am, are, is, was, were, will be. They are all formed from the verb 'to be'.
- ❖ Second, they have a thing called a 'past participle'.

Verb	Past participle
Ask	Asked
Claim	Claimed
Do	Done
Write	Written

So a complete passive verb could be 'will be done', 'has been formed' or 'was watched'. Here are some examples:

- ❖ Care should be taken when opening the door.
- ❖ The outcome will be decided next week.
- ❖ Applicants will only be accepted if proof of purchase is enclosed.
- ❖ It can be done.
- ❖ The problem could not have been foreseen.

Good uses of passives – There are times of course when it makes sense to use a passive.

- ❖ To make something less hostile – 'this bill has not been paid' (passive) is softer than 'you have not paid this bill' (active).
- ❖ To avoid taking the blame – 'a mistake was made' (passive) rather than 'we made a mistake' (active).
- ❖ When you don't know who or what the doer is – 'the England team has been picked'.
- ❖ If it simply sounds better.

But best to aim to make about 80-90% of your verbs active.

Exercise 2

The difference between active and passive verbs is not easy to grasp. So if you are confused, read this section again. If you are not confused, spot the passive verbs in the following examples and change the sentences around so that they use active verbs.

1. From a DVLA letter (you will need to invent a doer for the first verb)

The tax disc was sent to you at the address on your application form, but it was returned by the Post Office as undeliverable mail.

2. From a building society

In the Investment Account Statement, which was sent to you recently, it was indicated by us that we would write to you again concerning the monthly interest that has been paid to you under the terms of your account.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

3. From a council leaflet to parents (use 'we' for the Education Department, 'you' for the parent).

Advice must also be sought from any other professional likely to have relevant information. If there is anyone whom you think should be consulted, for example a specialist doctor your child is seeing, please let the Area Education Office know. Every professional whose advice is sought will be sent a copy of any information that is provided by you.

Talk to your reader

Write with your reader in mind. If you want to encourage people to read your report, give them a piece of writing that is lively and readable. Imagine you are presenting your report to your reader yourself. Think carefully: What do they know already? What do you need to tell them? Talk directly to your readers in language they understand. You will find that using shorter sentences and active verbs will already have made a difference.

'I' and 'we' – As we said earlier, reports used to be full of passive verbs. This allowed the writer to remain anonymous by leaving out the doer. They used phrases like:

- ◆ it was found that
- ◆ it is accepted that
- ◆ it is recommended that

The reason (or excuse) for this used to be that the writer was writing on behalf of the organisation. But usually everyone knows who has written the report, who interviewed people and so on.

*EngPro note – although, using this form is considered acceptable in most business writing and is helpful for business cases and the like, the investigative report is still to be written in the **third person**. This means that you would not use the phrases below – we have left them in this document as Plain English extends to all parts of your career.*

Let the readers know there is a person behind the print. It's not just friendlier; 'I', 'you' and 'we' are also usually easier to understand. Use phrases like:

- ◆ we found that
- ◆ I accept that
- ◆ we recommend that

Obviously you will use 'I' if the report is all your own work, and 'we' if you are reporting on a team effort. But be sure that your audience knows who you are talking about.

Understandable words

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.

At the end of the factsheet is a list of a few of the words that we suggest you avoid. But for most words you will have to decide yourself whether they are suitable. Most importantly, don't use jargon that is part of your working life unless you are writing to someone who uses the same jargon. If report is to

FACTSHEET – Plain English

technical people, the jargon word 'OTMR' could be very useful in saving time and space. But when writing a report that non-technical people will read, you wouldn't use it without explaining what it means. Remember here that your report might have to extend to varied audiences, so always introduce the abbreviation in full. E.g. the On-train monitoring recorder (OTMR).

In general, use everyday English whenever you can. Again, imagine you are presenting your report in person. Write to communicate, not to impress.

Don't be afraid to give instructions

Sit! Brush your teeth. Please send it to me.

These are all commands – officially called imperatives. They are the fastest and most direct way of giving someone instructions. However, if we asked a hardened bureaucrat to write these expressions, we would end up with something like the following.

Dogs are advised that they should sit down. Your teeth should be brushed. I should be grateful if you would send it to me.

There always seems to be a fear of commands. The most common fault is putting 'customers should do this' or 'you should do this' instead of just 'do this'. Perhaps people worry that commands sound too harsh. But you can often solve this by putting the word 'please' in front. However, if something must be done, it is best not to say 'please' as it gives the reader the option to refuse the request. Here are some examples of long-winded phrases and shorter versions that use commands.

- ❖ You should just think of it as a complete statement. (Just think of it as a complete statement.)
- ❖ Writers should aim to be punchy. (Be punchy.)
- ❖ They should be split where suitable. (Split them where suitable.)

The last example is probably the worst because it uses a passive verb – 'should be split'. Unfortunately this is very common in instructions. For example:

- ❖ The packet should be removed from the box. The contents should then be placed in the oven. (Remove the packet from the box. Then place the contents in the oven.)

Nominalisation

A 'nominalisation' is a type of 'abstract noun'. 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. For example:

Verb	Past participle
Complete	Completion
Introduce	Introduction
Provide	Provision
Fail	Failure
Arrange	Arrangement
Investigate	Investigation
Use	Utilisation

FACTSHEET – Plain English

So what's wrong with them?

The problem is that writers often use nominalisations when they should use the verbs they come from. Like passive verbs, too many nominalisations make writing very dull and heavy-going. Here are some examples of nominalisations, with our plain English versions in brackets.

- ◆ We had a discussion about the matter. (We discussed the matter.)
- ◆ The report made reference to staff shortages. (The report referred to staff shortages.)
- ◆ The decision was taken by the Board. (The Board decided.)
- ◆ The implementation of the policy has been done by a team. (A team has implemented the policy.)

Exercise 3

Bring the following sentences to life by revealing the verbs hidden by nominalisations and making any changes you think are necessary.

1. From a letter on Housing Benefit

If you would like consideration to be given to your application, please send me your last five wage slips.

2. From an electricity company

Your meter is operated by the utilisation of tokens.

3. From a surveyor's report

We can solve the problem by the removal of the plaster to a height of one metre, the insertion of a new damp proof course and the introduction of suitable floor joists.

4. From a gas region

We have made an examination of your account and can tell you that application for budget payments at this late stage is still possible.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

5. From a council to a building contractor

To cause minimum disruption to teaching provision, it is imperative that the school roof renewal is carried out by your company concurrently with your completion of the Special Needs Unit.

Cutting out useless words

Now you're going to put all the techniques you've learnt so far into practice, along with one other technique - cutting out useless words.

Exercise 4

So with all these examples, shorten sentences, put in active verbs, use everyday English, make them more personal and direct, replace nominalisations and cut out useless words.

1. From an electricity board letter

The standing charge is payable in respect of each and every quarter.

2. From a bank

You will be sent a letter regarding current interest rates not less often than once a year.

3. From a credit company

Notice must be given of your intention to cancel the agreement a period of 30 days prior to your cancellation.

4. From a building society

Should you be unable to agree to the contents of the statement or you have any questions thereon, please write to this department at the address overleaf, enclosing your passbook or certificate and the statement.

5. From a management consultant

You are required to notify us immediately in the event of your unavoidable absence from work for sickness or any other reason and the attached note explains your obligations in this respect.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

6. From a solicitor

We would advise that attached herewith is the entry form which has been duly completed and would further advise that we should be grateful if you would give consideration to the various different documents to which we have made reference.

7. From another electricity company

In consequence of the non-payment of the above-mentioned account, an employee will call at your home for the purpose of obtaining a meter reading and disconnecting the supply on 10 March.

8. From a local authority

If you are experiencing difficulty in meeting your rent payments and are not currently in receipt of Housing Benefit, you may qualify for help towards your rent under the Housing Benefit Scheme and details of this can be forwarded upon request. Alternatively, if you require advice regarding either your rent arrears or possible entitlement to Housing Benefit, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Other points to consider

Sounding positive - 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)

Exercise 5

Now rewrite these examples in a positive way (and use what you have learned so far to make any other changes you think are necessary).

1. From a local authority

You will reduce your chances of a council home if you do not keep your choice of areas as wide as possible.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

2. From a bank (make this more personal)

No-one may apply for the scheme unless their account is credited with at least £1000.

Using lists

Lists are excellent for splitting information up. There are two main types of list:

- ◆ You can have a continuous sentence with several listed points picked out at the beginning, middle or end.
- ◆ You can have a list of separate points with an introductory statement (like this list).

In the list above, each of the points is a complete sentence so they each start with a capital letter and end with a full stop.

With a list that is part of a continuous sentence, put semi-colons (;) after each point and start each with a lower case letter.

If you can prove that:

- ◆ you were somewhere else at the time;
- ◆ you were not related to Mary; and
- ◆ you are over 21;

you should be all right.

As you can see, the next to last point has 'and' after the semi-colon. If you only had to prove one of the three points instead of all of them, this word would be 'or'.

Always make sure each point follows logically from the introduction. For example, if you took out 'you' from the second and third points it would still flow as a normal sentence but not as a list. The third point would effectively read 'If you can prove that are over 21' which obviously does not make sense.

We have also used bullet points for each listed point. These are better than numbers or letters as they draw your attention to each point without giving you extra information to take in.

Exercise 6

Use bullet points to split the following sentence into a list.

1. From a scientist's report (make this more personal)

People with a mathematical brain or those who display a very sharp sense of humour or chess players of club standard or higher are more likely to show early signs of being musical.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

Grammar

We're not trying to be trendy here by breaking some of the grammatical rules. We're just going to destroy some of the grammatical myths. In the past, grammarians decided it was 'bad form' to do certain things. But our rule is, if it makes your sentence clearer, don't worry about 'bad form'.

- ❖ You can start a sentence with 'and', 'but', 'because', 'so', 'or' or 'however'.
- ❖ You can 'split infinitives'. So, you can say 'to boldly go'.
- ❖ You can end a sentence with a preposition. In fact, it is something we should stand up for.
- ❖ And you can repeat a word in a sentence if you can't find a better word.

Of course, this does not mean you should break these so-called 'rules' all the time - just when you want to make a sentence flow better.

EngPro footnote to that – many people in the rail and aviation industries are quite keen about grammar correctness. We would advise not breaking any grammatical rules in your report. Don't upset or offside your readers – you can't be punished for being correct!

'Brevity' - Memo to the War Cabinet

'To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points. I ask my colleagues and their staff to see to it that their reports are shorter. The aim should be reports which set out the main points in a series of short, crisp paragraphs.

If a report relies on detailed analysis of some complicated factors, or on statistics, these should be set out in an appendix. Often the occasion is best met by submitting not a full-dress report, but an 'aide-memoire' consisting of headings only, which can be expanded orally if needed.

Let us have an end of such phrases as these:

'It is also of importance to bear in mind the following considerations', or 'Consideration should be given to the possibility of carrying into effect'. Most of these woolly phrases are mere padding, which can be left out altogether, or replaced by a single word. Let us not shrink from using the short expressive phrase, even if it is conversational.

Reports drawn up on the lines I propose may first seem rough as compared with the flat surface of officialese jargon. But the saving in time will be great, while the discipline of setting out the real points concisely will prove an aid to clearer thinking.'

Sir Winston Churchill, 9 August 1940

FACTSHEET – Plain English

Summary

We hope you have enjoyed this fact sheet and that it will help you write in plain English.

- ❖ Plan carefully before you start writing.
- ❖ Use an outline or a mind map so that you know exactly what you'll be writing about.
- ❖ Organise your report into sections.
- ❖ Use everyday English whenever possible.
- ❖ Avoid jargon and legalistic words, and explain any technical terms you have to use.
- ❖ Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words.
- ❖ Try to stick to one main idea in a sentence.
- ❖ Use active verbs as much as possible.
- ❖ Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
- ❖ Be concise.
- ❖ Imagine you are talking to your reader.
- ❖ Write sincerely, personally, in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.
- ❖ And always check that your report is accurate, clear, concise and readable.

Words to avoid

Try to use the alternatives suggested in brackets:

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)

FACTSHEET – Plain English

ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

In some cases, our answers are about the only ones possible. However, most things can be expressed clearly and well in several different ways. If your answers are different from ours, don't worry. Compare them carefully and see whether there are any extra techniques you can pick up from them. And of course, our suggestions aren't perfect!

Exercise 1 – Keep your sentences short

1. I raised your difficulty about arriving ready for work on time. I pointed out that: your managers had done their best to take account of your travel problems; and you had agreed with them that the Green Lane depot was the most convenient place for you to work. However, your initial improvement was short-lived. Over the past two months your punctuality has dropped to a totally unacceptable level.
2. I do not seem to have received the information required to set up your budget scheme. I now enclose the relevant form. Please fill it in and return it.
3. Please let me have the latest typed version of the form in the next seven days. I suggest we meet here on 19 December to finalise the text. You could then give me an estimate of the cost of producing a typeset proof.
4. I refer to the earlier notice served in respect of your account. As the arrears now amount to the sum shown above, you leave me no alternative but to commence court action. Details of your account have been referred to the company's solicitor.

Exercise 2 – Actives and passives

1. We sent you the tax disc at the address on your application form, but the Post Office returned it as undeliverable mail.
2. In the Account Statement which we sent you recently, we indicated that we would write to you again concerning the monthly interest that we have paid to you under the terms of your account.
3. We must also seek advice from any other professional likely to have relevant information. If there is anyone you think we should consult, for example a specialist doctor your child is seeing, please let the Area Education Office know. We will send a copy of any information you provide to every professional whose advice we seek.

Talk to your reader

Please pay this debt immediately. You have four days to pay or to contact this office. (Ring the number shown above.) If you do not pay the debt or contact us within this time, we may have to start legal proceedings. So don't ignore this letter.

Exercise 3 – What is a nominalisation?

1. If you would like us to consider your application, please send me your last five wage slips.

FACTSHEET – Plain English

2. You operate your meter using tokens.
3. We can solve the problem by removing the plaster to a height of one metre and putting in a new damp-proof course and suitable floor joists.
4. We have examined your account and can tell you that you can still apply for budget payments at this late stage.
5. To disrupt teaching as little as possible, your company must renew the school roof at the same time as finishing the Special Needs Unit.

Exercise 4 – Cutting out useless words

1. You must pay the standing charge every quarter.
2. We will send you a letter about current interest rates at least once a year.
3. You must tell us that you intend to cancel the agreement 30 days before you cancel.
4. If you don't agree with the contents of the statement or you have any questions about it, please write to us at the address over the page. Enclose your passbook or certificate and the statement.
5. You must tell us immediately if you are away from work for sickness or any other unavoidable reason. The attached note explains what you must do.
6. We have filled in the entry form and attached it to this letter. Please consider the various documents we have referred to.
7. As you have not paid this bill, we will call at your home on 10 March to cut off your supply and read your meter.
8. If you are having difficulty paying your rent and you do not get Housing Benefit, you may be able to get help towards your rent under the Housing Benefit Scheme. Please ask us for details. If you would like advice about your unpaid rent or whether you can get Housing Benefit, please contact me.

Exercise 5 – Other points to consider

1. You will increase your chances of a council home if you keep your choice of areas as wide as possible.
2. You may apply for the scheme if your account has £1000 or more in it.

Exercise 6 – Using lists

1. You are more likely to show early signs of being musical if you:
 - ❖ have a mathematical brain;
 - ❖ show a very sharp sense of humour; or
 - ❖ play chess to at least club standard.