

Writing made easier

These guidelines attempt to ensure consistency and clarity in communications. The way we write is an important part of the council's corporate image. The Council will appear confused unless all staff use language consistently when writing to the public. If you use clear, concise language, your readers are more likely to believe that you are being honest and open. Corporate communications staff can always advise on written material before publication.

What's plain English?

Thanks to people in organisations such as local councils, banks, building societies, insurance companies and government departments, we have learned to accept an official style of writing that is inefficient and often unfriendly. However, in the last few years, many former offenders have started to put things right, either rewriting their documents clearly or training their staff in the art of plain English or both.

The main advantages of plain English are:

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

Plain English is a customer-focused message, written with the reader in mind and with the right content and tone of voice, that is clear and concise.

Plain English is not:

- slovenly in style, spelling or grammar
- baby English, over simple or patronising.
- about banning long words or new words.
- an amateur's method of communication. Most forward-looking managers always write in plain English.

Keep sentences short

Most experts - and all journalists - agree that an average sentence length should be 15 to 20 words. 30 words should be the absolute maximum – as no-one here is Charles Dickens or Shakespeare! 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). Follow the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence, plus perhaps one other related point. At first you may still find yourself writing the odd long sentence, especially when trying to explain a complicated point. But most long sentences can be broken up in some way.

Use active verbs

Active verbs stop letters sounding overly bureaucratic – and make them sound crisp and professional. Passive verbs make writing more long-winded and less lively.

'The tree crushed Peter' is active but 'Peter was crushed by the tree' is passive.

Here are some more examples of how to turn a passive verb into an active verb:

This matter will be considered by the Council shortly. (Passive)
The Council will consider this matter shortly. (Active)

The benefit was awarded by the Council. (Passive)
The Council awarded the benefit. (Active)

There are advantages to using passive verbs:

- To make something less hostile - 'this appointment has not been kept' (passive) is friendlier than 'you have not kept this appointment' (active).
- To avoid taking the blame - 'a mistake was made' (passive) rather than 'we made a mistake' (active).

But active verbs should be used wherever possible as they deliver a crisper message.

The use of 'I' and 'The Council'

When writing letters the Council always uses either 'I' or 'The Council'. The Council writes reports in the third person (Rushcliffe Borough Council is) to make the reports more formal. The Council does not advocate the use of 'you' or 'we' in letters and formal communications.

Use words appropriate for the reader

When you are talking to your reader, 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. You can use jargon when writing to people in the same profession or to people you know will understand, but avoid using it for customers.

For example:

Don't say

wheeled refuse container
local authority
members
resources
persons

Prefer

bin
council
councillors
money, staff
people

Always explain abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations are a good, shorthand way of passing on information. But only if everybody knows what they mean! Using abbreviations can exclude your reader and look patronising if you do not explain them fully. We get so used to using them that we can forget that the majority of the country has no idea what LGA, BV, EMT etc mean.

At the beginning of your document say: As a result of *of Best Value (BV)* then later you can write: *BV requires us to ...*

Here are some more to avoid.

- ◆ Jan and Feb - months deserve their full name.
- ◆ Ampersands - the symbol '&'. Write 'and', it helps your reader's understanding (unless it forms part of a brand or trademark such as Marks & Spencers) - I

Use imperatives

Please send it to me.

Please fill in the form.

These are all commands – also known as imperatives. They are the fastest and most direct way of giving someone instructions. However, people consider that they are being ordered about and people are frightened to use them. Hardened bureaucrats would change imperatives and we would end up with something like this:

I should be grateful if you would send it to me

I would be obliged if you could complete the form at your earliest convenience.

So use imperatives where suitable to give a sharp, crisp meaning and save wasted words.

Avoid nominalisations

A nominalisation is a type of abstract noun. 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	Nominalisation
Provide	provision
Arrange	arrangement
Complete	completion

The problem is that often they are used instead of the verbs they come from. And because they are merely the names of things, they sound as if nothing is actually happening in the sentence and they make writing dull and heavy-going.

Here are some examples.

The implementation of the plan has been carried out by communications (avoid this).

Communications implemented the plan. (use this)

Customer services were involved in the provision of advice to residents. (avoid this)

Customer services provided advice to residents. (use this)

Use positive language

Always try to emphasise the positive side of things.

For example:

If you don't renew your direct debit, we won't be able to renew your leisure centre membership (Negative)

Please renew your direct debit so that we can renew your membership of the scheme. (Positive)

Use 'disabled people' and 'elderly people' – not 'the disabled' and not 'the elderly'.

Apologising

If you are replying to a tricky letter with a complaint or a difficult problem, put yourself in the reader's shoes. Be professional, not emotional. You may have to give a firm, unwelcome answer, but be as helpful and polite as possible. If you are going to apologise, do so early. If the problem is your fault, say so. Apologise completely but concisely, sympathetically but sincerely. And whether it is your fault or not, try to emphasise what you can do for the other person.

Dispelling myths

- You can start a sentence with **and, but, because, so** 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 use the same **word** twice in a sentence if **you** can't find a better **word**.

Avoiding clichés

Clichés – stale, worn-out phrases can spoil otherwise well written and crisp writing. Likewise, jargon words which are meaningless and unintelligible fail to communicate. There are occasions where clichés and jargon can be used to good effect, so long as the reader knows they are deliberate. To help you recognise tired phrases, here are a few in current use: *put on the back burner, bottom line, low/high profile, having said that, passed its sell-by date* and pompous phrases like *wind of change* and *sea-change*. Some sayings demand instant excision: *address a problem, take on board, a wide range of issues, put on hold, a whole new ball game, quantum leap, in this day and age*. These examples are only just *the tip of the iceberg*. Just a few more we have had recently – *a wake-up call, all over bar the shouting, level playing field, back to the*

drawing board, learning curve and ballpark figure. Another common phrase is *at this point in time* – and can be much better replaced with now.

Prepositions

A preposition is a word used with a noun to relate the noun to some other word, e.g: in, over, with, for, upon. Sentences can be overrun by prepositions, e.g., "Our seats were very near to the orchestra". "Near" is enough and "to" can be left out. So it reads: "We sat near the orchestra".

It is generally agreed that you should not end a sentence with a preposition. You can break this rule if your ear tells you that that is where the preposition goes best.

Double negatives

Do not use double negatives. While it might seem not unclear to do so it can be confusing. Or rather, while it might seem clear, it can be confusing.

Use English not foreign or Latin phrases

Avoid foreign or Latin phrases.

Inter alia, ultra vires and *ipso facto* will mean nothing to most of the population and most council staff as well!

Use non-offensive language

There's no need to go overboard on "Politically Correct" (PC) words and phrases. But it is quite easy to use non-sexist terminology. You should try to avoid causing offence, especially with terms that apply equally to men and women.

For example, use:

Staffing not *Manpower* or *manning*

Plain English test

When Word checks spelling and grammar, it can display the following readability scores. Each readability score bases its rating on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. This is a tool only to give you a guide – and it is written for an American audience! Please don't let this lull you into a false sense of security – get someone else to check it as well if in any doubt.

Flesch Reading Ease score

Rates text on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier the text is to understand. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 60 to 70. Find it on Tools, Options, spelling and grammar. Select the check grammar with spelling and then 'show readability statistics' and then click OK. Click spelling.

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score

Rates text against US school grades. For example, a score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader can understand the document. For most standard documents, aim to score approximately 7.0 to 8.0. Word also tells you the percentage of your sentences that are

passive. If 25 per cent or more of your sentences are passive, you should try to reduce this to 10 per cent or less. The advice earlier should help you improve your score. Generally, by using shorter words, shorter sentences and writing as you would speak, you will achieve better scores. If you cannot spot problem areas, try highlighting single paragraphs or sections and using the spelling and grammar check to see if they are scoring particularly highly, and work on them.

Aim for the above scores when writing for the public. For Flesch Reading Ease you must score at least 50. For the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, score no higher than 10.

More points of grammar and style

Plural or singular?

The rules on making nouns and verbs agree are a common pitfall. Collective nouns, in general, take the singular.

The Cabinet is determined..
The team is gathering information on...

Pairs of nouns take the plural:
Clarity and accuracy are important in writing.

But there are exceptions to these rules, unfortunately:
The Police are looking for a ..

Choose the right word

Know the difference between:

Advice and advise
Affect and effect
Alternate and alternative
Appraise and apprise
Complement and compliment
Credible and credulous
Dependant and dependent
Discrete and discreet
Everyone and every one
Illusive and elusive
Infer and imply
License and licence
Principal and principle
Stationery and stationary

Choose simple words

Many of the words and phrases we commonly use at work can be replaced with much simpler ones. Here are a few examples:

<u>Avoid</u> require	<u>Prefer</u> <i>Need</i>	<u>Avoid</u> in the event of	<u>Prefer</u> <i>if</i>
enquire	<i>Ask</i>	implement	<i>carry out, do</i>
per annum	<i>a year, yearly</i>	commence	<i>start, begin</i>
in excess of	<i>more than</i>	in receipt of	<i>getting, receiving</i>
prior to residence complete	<i>Before Home fill in</i>	submit accordingly in lieu of	<i>send, give so instead of</i>
<u>Avoid</u> reimburse	<u>Prefer</u> <i>repay, pay back</i>	<u>Avoid</u> utilise	<u>Prefer</u> <i>use</i>
accompany in connection with	<i>go with About</i>	accomplish denote	<i>do show</i>
frequently jeopardise	<i>Often Risk</i>	hitherto modification	<i>until now change</i>
on the grounds that	<i>Because</i>	provided that	<i>if, as long as</i>
commencement remuneration	<i>Start pay, wages, salary</i>	statutory	<i>legal, byelaw</i>

Tautology

Tautology is repeating the same idea more than once by choosing the wrong words. This can be very irritating to the reader. Don't say:

Grateful thanks
New innovation
Revert back
Totally unique
True facts
Definite decision
Each and every
Old relic

Down with capitalism

Get rid of unnecessary capitals wherever possible. It's lower case for seasons, points of the compass, but upper for proper nouns, full titles of organisations, names of companies and organisations, political parties, trade names, books, films, publications.

It's small 'i' for internet, worldwide web, the government, descriptive job titles as in communications director, but capitals when a formal title as is President of XYZ organisation, thereafter president. Go small whenever you can.

The trend in modern English usage is to avoid unnecessary initial capitals. Very few words are true proper nouns and really need an initial capital. Some words which used to start with a capital (the seasons are a good example) no longer do.

Avoid too many capital letters in a sequence, as they are difficult to read.

Capitals can have a punctuating effect that hinder the smooth flow of the eye over the words. Compare the distracting:

Factors that May Affect the Success of the Strategy

with

Factors that may affect the success of the strategy

- Rushcliffe Borough Council needs initial capitals, but the council, county council, local councillors don't.
- Council Tax doesn't need initial caps, council tax is fine.

Job titles should be lower case: chief executive, head of communications etc. This rule applies in body text ('Nicky Mee, communications manager, spoke at the meeting...') where the title is descriptive of the work or position of the individual. However, in formal situations (addressing envelopes, signing off correspondence etc), job titles should be capitalised where lower case would look wrong, thus:

Chief Executive
Rushcliffe Borough Council

- Initial capitals can be used for the names of specific departments, committees, teams etc, when they are referred to in full. For example: Performance Management Board, the Environmental Health Division, but subsequent references to the department or the committee should be lower case.
- Avoid blocks of capitals LIKE THIS WHICH ARE HARD TO READ.

On your marks

Punctuation marks are the traffic signs to control and guide the reader through written work.

Signs and signals. If you are aware of punctuation that suggests there's something amiss. If you don't notice the punctuation then it's doing its job. A page peppered with commas and semicolons is a signal they've got the better of you. Too many marks confuse the reader. Faulty punctuation leads to misunderstanding and ambiguity. And they are just as crucial as correct spelling – perhaps more so. Here's a recap.

Of all the marks, the **full stop** is the most powerful: it signifies the end of a sentence. It keeps length to the ideal 15 – 20 words. limit for sharp, clear copy. Aim for two to three sentences per paragraph. An A4 printed page without illustrations needs six to eight paragraph breaks, otherwise it's turn-off time.

A **colon** is used where something, such as a list or a statement, is to follow:

The working party ate an enormous quantity of food: sandwiches, rolls, pasties, salads, pies, cakes and fruit

His instructions were clear: "The daily beatings will continue until morale improves."

A **semi-colon** can be used to connect sentences that have a strong relationship, and thereby create a stronger impact than if the separate sentences had been broken up by full stops:

He looked at his pay slip; he was always happy on the 23rd of the month.

Three **commas** in a sentence usually mean one too many. Through wrong positioning they are the cause of confusion. Also the culprit when sentences become too long and when a full stop would be better. A **hyphen** denotes two or more words to be read as one but try to cut and join if you can. Check dictionaries.

The **apostrophe** is mostly for the possessive: it goes before the 's' in the cat's paws, when it is one cat but after it for more than one. And it is used in omissions (shan't) but not for plurals or abbreviations (MPs). Don't use exclamation marks in formal writing – save them for emails only.

Apostrophes show that one or more letters have been left out of a word, and are placed in the space from which the letters are missing:

we are = we're

is not = isn't

will not = won't

it is = it's

Apostrophes also indicate ownership. Usually, you add an 's' to a word to show that its subject owns the next word:

Pat's husband

Roger's bed

the lodger's luggage

If the owner's name ends in 's', you can use: James's cat but it is tidier to leave off the second 's' and use : James' cat

If there is more than one owner (eg four lodgers), the apostrophe goes after the 's':

The lodgers' luggage

The girls' dolls

The ladies' room

If a word is plural and does not end in 's' (children, women), an 's' will be added and the apostrophe will precede it:

The children's home

The women's session

Note especially that if you use the words 'it' or 'your' to denote ownership, there is no apostrophe:

The cat licked its feet

The pig ate its food

Yours is the red one

Quotations

Quotation marks are for quoting reported speech or from a document. For example: as *you said at the time "no comment"*; as *you wrote in your letter "no way"*. Use double quotation marks for quotes and use single marks when you use a quote within a quote, for example: "he said 'you'll be alright'". However if it is a heading or headline, use single quotes.

Often people put single quotes around a word or phrase to indicate there is something about it that they are not comfortable with. This is not correct English and should not be done.

Unless you are writing about an event that has already happened the quote is always in the present tense, for example, "she says" not "she said".

The double quotation marks should come after any punctuation mark which is part of the quotation, but before any punctuation mark which is not part of the quotation.

"He asked me 'Where are we?'", she replied

but

"Did he say 'Here we are'?", she pondered.

Full stops always come after the last set of quotation marks.

Numbers

- Always write out the numbers one to nine in words and use numerals for 10 upwards.

- The exception is when a sentence starts with a number, in which case the number should be spelt out. For example: 'Seventeen year old....' But avoid really big numbers like 1,243 at the beginning of sentences.
- The same goes for positions – it's first to ninth, 10th and above in figures.
- Numbers with four (or more) figures take commas: 3,000 not 3000, £4,500 not £4500
- With money and time avoid clutter. If it is a round figure, leave out the zero. So £6, not £6.00 but £6.25; 10am not 10.00am but 10.25am, 12 noon, midnight
- Use figures in lists of units of measurement – 6, 12 and 18 hectares
- Use figures with standard abbreviations – 6ft, 8p – but explain specialist ones.
- The word "per cent" should always be used in the main body of your text: 50 per cent, not 50%. Use the symbol in tables.
- ◆ Telephone numbers should be split into readable sections - 01949 875200 or 0115 981 9911. Never split telephone numbers over two lines.
- ◆ Never split any number over two lines as it will make your meaning less clear.
- ◆ It is common to use the following *2 4 bedroom houses*. But this would be better written as two, four-bedroom houses.

Dates

Always write them with the day of the week first and in plain numbers: Tuesday 11 January 2004 (day, date, month, year). Not 22nd or 23rd just 22 or 23. This applies in the body of text as well on letters and memos.

For example: Thank you for your letter received on 11 January 2004.

Bullet points

Bullet points or lists provide a simple and effective way of getting messages across. They usually follow either a heading or an introductory phrase ending in a colon.

In display material such as posters, leaflets and exhibition boards you can keep things simple. Leave out the punctuation at the end of each line as fewer marks make less clutter which gives greater impact and ensures the words stand out.

Hyphen (-)

This is used:

- ◆ in compound words used about someone or something;
He is a well-known man, but the man is well known.
- ◆ to join a prefix to a proper name;
anti-Darwinian
- ◆ to prevent misconceptions by linking words;
twenty-odd people
- ◆ to prevent misconceptions by separating a prefix from the main word;
One player resigned, but later he re-signed
- ◆ to represent a common second element in all but the last word of a list;
two-, three-, or four-fold

Hyphens should only be used within words, for example self-confident, while dashes are used to separate a clause in a sentence – like this – and give a clearer, longer break than commas.

Don't use a dash instead of 'to', for example: The event is from 1 to 4pm, not 1-4pm

Exclamation marks

An exclamation is a short expression of surprise, shock or anger. Wow! You surprise me! As such they don't often occur within our text except in publicity material. When exclamation marks are used correctly there should be only one.

Use of Italics

Italics should be used to refer to the names of certain items in body text. For example:

Newspapers – *Nottingham Evening Post*

Book titles – *On the Road*

TV and radio programmes – *Eastenders*

Other words to be written in italics include songs, album titles, hymns, official reports, government White Papers and Green Papers and names of publications such as *Horizon*.

Adding Emphasis

Using *italics*, underlining and **boldening** text are really the only ways to add emphasis to your letters or other writing. Don't overuse these and don't use them together. *Don't use underlining for work intended for webpages.*

Other methods of adding emphasis are complicated and ultimately tiring on the eyes. When producing an article or a leaflet you can put some text in a box to emphasise it, but too many of these are confusing and distract from the main text, so that the text in the box might be ignored altogether.

Adding special features changes the spacing and sizing of the text and people find it more difficult to read than ordinary text. You should use them to add emphasis only, and not in large blocks of text. For example:

☺ **Keep text in bold, capitals, reverse (black on white) and italics under control. Use bold rather than other methods to add emphasis.**

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Headings

Headings should be like this 'Flush out your old boiler', rather than 'Flush out Your old Boiler' or any other combinations with capitals in – the first word should have a capital and nothing else afterwards should have a capital unless it is required as in a town or name etc. Headings should be bold and not underlined.

Font

At Rushcliffe we should always use **12 point Arial** as standard – not 10 point or 11 point as many people do - as it annoys people and is hard to read for anyone approaching middle age or older.

Spelling

Make sure that you run the spell checker on all correspondence – emails, letters etc – and then read through your document slowly to make sure it makes sense and the

correct words have been used as the spell checker is not infallible. Get someone else to read it for you as a double check. Keep a list of those words you know trip you up regularly, it happens to us all. If it's important the communications team are happy to proofread any documents. Have a look at the poem below to see how you can be tripped up:

I have a spelling checker

I have a spelling checker.
It came with my PC.
It plane lee marks four my revue
Miss steaks aye can knot see.

Eye ran this poem threw it.
Your sure real glad two no.
Its very polished in its weigh,
My checker tolled me sew.

A checker is a blessing.
It freeze yew lodes of thyme.
It helps me right awl stiles two reed,
And aides me when aye rime.

Each frays comes posed up on my screen
Eye trussed too bee a joule.
The checker pours o'er every word
To cheque sum spelling rule.

Bee fore a veiling checkers
Hour spelling mite decline,
And if we're laks oar have a laps,
We wood bee maid too wine.

Butt now bee cause my spelling
Is checked with such grate flare,
There are know faults with in my cite,
Of nun eye am a wear.

Now spelling does not phase me,
It does knot bring a tier.
My pay purrs awl due glad den
With wrapped words fare as hear.

To rite with care is quite a feet
Of witch won should be proud,
And wee mussed dew the best wee can,
Sew flaws are knot aloud.

Sow ewe can sea why aye dew prays
Such soft wear four pea seas,
And why eye brake in two averse
Buy righting want too please.

Fundamentals

- keep it simple
- keep it short
- put yourself in the position of the reader
- be clear about what you want to say before you start
- check spelling and punctuation – do not rely on the spell-checker
- check that what you have written will be clear and unambiguous to the reader who may not have the same level of knowledge on the subject as you
- in letters and emails be polite and courteous

Further reading

The Communications team have recent editions of some of the books listed below – please contact us for further details.

Dictionaries

- The Oxford Dictionary of English
- The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors (R. M. Ritter)

Plain English

- Oxford Plain English Guide (Martin Cutts)
- Mind the Gaffe: The Penguin Guide to Common Errors in English (R. L. Trask)

Style guides (grammar, punctuation, capitalisation)

- Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation (Lynne Truss)
- The Elements of Style (W. Strunk and E. B. White)
- The Elements of Typographic Style (R. Bringhurst)
- The Oxford Guide to Style (R. M. Ritter)

Thesauri

- The New Oxford Thesaurus of English (Patrick Hanks)