# Communicating with Older People
## Writing in plain English

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15 Ensure that you use good grammar, spelling and punctuation.
16 Aim for an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words, with some longer and shorter sentences for variety and effect.
17 Use strong verbs (rather than nominalizations/deverbal nouns, e.g. 'decide', not 'make a decision').
18 Favour active verbs where you can ('the team decided', not 'it was decided by the team').
19 Write in the first and second person ('I'/'we' and 'you').
20 Try to phrase your points positively.
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27    For text on paper, use good-quality paper with a matt finish.
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30    If writing for readers with special needs, adapt layout and design accordingly.

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36    Ask members of the target audience to comment on the text, including how easy it is to understand, how fast it is to read, and how much they like it.
37    Consider testing your text on the real audience, if time and money allow, or otherwise using plain-English editors to provide an expert opinion.

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38    Consider acquiring plain-language skills in-house if you have staff with the aptitude, and your organization is large enough to merit the investment of time and money.
39    Otherwise, commission plain-English editors, for a professional and cost-effective service.
40    Either way, make use of editorial training courses, publications and knowledge.

# 1. Old age and our society

I think it is sad that our society is so youth-orientated, with much emphasis on the desirability of being (and hence looking) young. When older people may have difficulties in keeping or finding work, find it hard to access the products or services they need, and feel pressured by the media and advertisers to spend money on hair dye and anti-ageing skin products, it is no wonder that so many of us would like to be '21 again'. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) refers to common assumptions that older people are incapable, unattractive, asexual and a burden.[1] And Age UK found that even some older people thought that it was better to use younger people in adverts: 'Who wants to see too many oldies? Nobody!'[2]

Yet this is nothing more than a culture-based con. Who says that older people have less to contribute (and are less lovely to look at) than their younger counterparts? Indeed, there are many other societies in the world whose members revere their older citizens as a source of wisdom and beauty. A civilized society should treat all its people as of equal value.

The unfortunate attitudes towards old age that stem from our cultural fallacy underlie many of the practical problems that this guide seeks to address. It is unrealistic to attempt to overturn such fundamental beliefs through one publication, but it would be good if – as well as showing individuals and organizations how to write effectively for older people – it also made readers think about the ageist attitudes that most of us (young and old alike) harbour, however subtly and subconsciously.

What could you do, in your personal and/or professional life, to help change attitudes to ageing and to older people?

**What you can do to make a difference**

Third Age Ireland is a voluntary, community organization that aims 'to empower local communities throughout Ireland by promoting to best effect the resource its older people represent'. It provides the following ideas:[3]

**Challenge ageism no matter what your age**
- Challenge ageism by examining your own attitudes to people of all ages.
- Be open to friendships and relationships with people across the generations.
- Don't accept a lower standard of living for older people – just because they are older.
- Question policies and practices that seem to stereotype older people and make them less equal in society.
- Watch your ageist language, and question ageist attitudes in friends, family and colleagues.

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[1] NUJ (2006) *NUJ guidelines on reporting age*: http://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-guidelines-on-reporting-age/

[2] Age UK (2010) *Golden Economy: The Consumer Marketplace in an Ageing Society* (research by ILC-UK): http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/images/uploads/publication-pdfs/pdf_pdf_155.pdf

[3] http://www.thirdageireland.ie/advocacy/14/combatting-ageism.html

A straw poll of members of the 'Gray and Proud' Facebook group produced these other ideas:

- Honour older people for their wisdom and life experience.
- Include older family members in your everyday life, supporting them to take a more active role in the family.
- Proudly tell people your real age instead of making jokes about being younger.
- Allow yourself to go grey and gain wrinkles rather than covering up the natural signs of ageing with unnatural processes and products that may even damage your health.
- Donate some or all of the money you'll save by not buying anti-ageing products to a charity that supports older people.
- Think about the role model you are providing to younger people, in terms of encouraging them to have confidence in their natural appearance.
- Try not to regret growing old: it is a privilege denied to many.

## Background

In December 2010, Age UK published a report, *The Golden Economy: The Consumer Marketplace in an Ageing Society*, based on research by the International Longevity Centre UK (ILC-UK). Available free of charge online, this report gathered evidence and arguments about the older consumer through research, literature analysis, and sense-checking with two focus groups. Its aim is 'to identify where the market is working, where it is not, and what is the role for the private, public and voluntary sector in terms of tackling some of the market failures'. There is detailed analysis of the older consumer market, including its members' wealth, income, expenditure, spending habits (in term of shopping in-store and online, choosing brands and products, and shopping around) and unfulfilled aspirations.

The report describes many barriers that prevent older people fully accessing the market. They are grouped into five categories: product design; the retail environment (shops, the local area, transport and mobility; and payment mechanisms); the digital divide; consumer protection; and marketing and the media.

## Problems in written communication

In four of these five categories, it is possible to pick out problems that relate to written communication (both language- and design-related aspects), as the following excerpts show:

### Product design

The instructions with the hand-held tape recorder are – as with all electrical items – in very small print.[4] (page 31)

In many European cities one of the main groups eating in restaurants are those over 50, yet very few 50-year-olds are able to read a menu by candlelight without their reading glasses. That is because the menus are usually designed by young people in

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[4] Older People's Programme (unpublished) *Investigate! Older People Investigating Goods and Services* (research undertaken on behalf of Help the Aged in 2006)

print shops not for senior citizens. What a crazy situation: the people who the restaurants want to market to cannot read any of their sales literature.[5] (page 31)

A number of participants in both [focus] groups noted that they found information written on products or in instruction booklets difficult to read. This was down to both print size – it is simply too small – and a problem with language. Some people commented on how the language in instructions is often unclear and written in technical jargon. (page 32)

Similar problems were highlighted about information on food packaging – it can be too small or poorly explained. (page 32)

One participant observed that he found the pictures on food packaging misleading and dishonest. (page 32)

### The retail environment

Another [participant in a focus group] mentioned finding it difficult to read small price tags. (page 40)

Others were deterred from using shops where staff used technical jargon when asked about products. (page 40)

### The digital divide

For those who do not go online, issues such as a lack of motivation, a fear or distrust of technology, low media literacy, cost, ageism and usability are all key barriers.[6] (page 48)

Accessibility and usability of online (and other new media content) services frequently fail to meet the needs of an older population and are a major barrier to internet use among older people. (page 49)

### Consumer protection

"Customers" are targeted through mass communications (email, telephone, direct mail) and tricked out of money with, for example, the offer of a free holiday or entry in to a competition. (page 51)

A Help the Aged survey revealed that seven out of ten older people in Britain, more than 6.6 million people, are targeted by scams every month, either by telephone or by letter. The survey also revealed that, in Britain, 38 per cent of older people are not confident in their ability to spot a scam …[7] (page 52)

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[5] Patrick Dixon (2008) 'Marketing to Older Consumers', interview for *Marketeer*, October: http://www.globalchange.com/marketing-to-older-consumers.htm
[6] T Watts (2009) 'Major survey reveals why older people are increasingly on the wrong side of the "digital divide"', *Mature Times*, 6 October
[7] Survey commissioned by Help the Aged and carried out by ICM (2008)

### *Marketing and the media*

According to Admap [a magazine on effectiveness in marketing communications], 90 per cent of marketing spend is directed at the under-50s. So, unsurprisingly, older consumers feel the advertising industry doesn't talk to them or address their aspirations, needs and concerns.[8] (page 56)

In addition to the failure to target older people, even marketing that is not specifically aimed at a youth audience can effectively whitewash older people from their advertising by only portraying younger people: A leading car manufacturer spokeswoman admits that the brand does not use models who look over 50 in ads …[9] (page 56)

Despite the fact that the over-50s account for 45 per cent of consumer spending, for example buying 80 per cent of all top-of-the-range cars, they are rarely featured in advertisements, argued Help the Aged in 2006.[10]

A recent study for IPC magazines found that older people continue to be under-represented and where they were found in advertisements, it was largely for disability aids.[11]

Taken together, these problems suggest major shortcomings in the purpose, content, structure, style and design of text aimed at older people (or at a general audience that includes older people).

## Why it matters

Both older people and organizations have much to gain from these language and design-related barriers being removed.

In our society, the ability to access public-, private- and voluntary-sector products and services is vital to day-to-day life. Traditionally, the public and voluntary sectors – with their lack of profit motive – ensured that those who were unable to access private-sector offerings did not go without. But in today's environment of public-sector cuts and budgetary constraints, and reduced charitable giving (of both money and time) caused by the recession[12], access to private-sector goods and services is more important than ever. Also, more and more services and organizations that were once firmly based in the public sector are being privatized, or at least turned into 'arm's length' agencies of public-sector organizations, which often operate more in line with commercial practices.

All this means that people who cannot access private-sector products and services may find themselves underprivileged, excluded and isolated. As a result, they can feel frustrated and depressed: hardly a desirable (or even satisfactory) situation in a civilized society.

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[8] Jane Silk (2009) Interview in *The Marketer*, April: http://www.themarketer.co.uk/archives/interviews/qa-interviews/jane-silk/
[9] David Benady (2008) 'Marketing to the over-50s', *Marketing Week*, April: http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/home/marketing-to-the-over-50s/2060579.article
[10] *Help the Aged Policy Statement 2006*
[11] Isabelle Szmigin and Marylyn Carrigan (2001) 'Learning to love the older consumer', *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 1(1): http://oro.open.ac.uk/15166/
[12] *The impact of the recession on charitable giving in the UK* (2009), Charities Aid Foundation and National Council for Voluntary Organisations: http://www.cafonline.org/pdf/ukgivingreport2009.pdf

Apart from the moral satisfaction of doing the right thing (given the current emphasis on corporate social responsibility), organizations have much to gain from treating older people as valued consumers. Analysis by the Personal Finance Research Centre at Bristol University (for the ILC-UK's report) shows that the 65-plus age group now accounts for 20% of the UK's consumer population (those aged 16 and above) and is expected to rise, so that people aged 65-plus will account for 25% of the consumer market in 2030. In other words, the older consumer market is large and will become even greater, being forecast to increase by 81% from 2005 to 2030 (with the market of adults under 60 growing by just 7%).[13]

## Editorial expertise

Throughout the guide, you will find shaded boxes that contain quotations from editors offering their tips and anecdotes on writing for older people.

Qualified and experienced freelance editors are listed in the Directory of Editorial Services on the website of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP). This is an excellent source of professional editing support for all organizations producing written materials, both in print and online. There is more on commissioning writing and editorial skills in Chapter 10.

**Resources**

**Relevant resources are listed in a box at the end of each chapter, like this one. They are all repeated at the end of the guide, where they appear in alphabetical order.**

*Age UK (2010) Golden Economy: The consumer marketplace in an ageing society* (research by ILC-UK): http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/images/uploads/publication-pdfs/pdf_pdf_155.pdf

SfEP Directory of Editorial Services: http://www.sfep.org.uk/directory/directory.asp
If you are looking for a professional editor, proofreader or editorial project manager, the SfEP Directory of Editorial Services provides contact information for more than 500 freelance editors, plus details of the skills, subjects and services they offer. Using the search box, you can pinpoint quickly and easily experienced freelances with the attributes you require.

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[13] Patrick Dixon (2008) 'Marketing to older consumers', interview for *Marketeer*, October:
www.globalchange.com/marketing-to-older-consumers.htm

# 2. Features of older people

Before discussing the features of the older population, and solutions for meeting their needs when writing text, it is important to define both 'older people' and 'writing'.

## Definitions

### Older people

'Older' has become the adjective of choice to describe people 'of a certain age' (another common euphemism, reflecting the cultural con discussed in Chapter 1), in preference to terms such as 'old' or 'elderly'. (There is more on terms for describing older people in Chapter 5.) But whom exactly do we mean when we refer to 'older people'? The term means different things to different people: at what age does one become 'older'? An intrinsic weakness of the word is that it is comparative (in that it describes the age of a person or a group of people in relation to that of others) yet does not define the age of the others. We are left wondering: older than whom? It is tempting to conclude than an 'older person' is always (at least a little) older than we are ourselves!

For the purposes of this guide, I use the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO): 'At the moment, there is no United Nations standard numerical criterion, but the UN agreed cutoff is 60+ years to refer to the older population.'[14] You will see, though, that many other sources have slightly different definitions of 'older', with several statistics quoted in this guide referring to those aged 65-plus.

Paradoxically, the comparative nature of the word 'older' is perhaps also a strength, in that it encompasses the meaning that ageing is not a process that we have either completed or not completed. Rather, it is a process that happens gradually to us all, starting the day we are born. It can therefore serve as a useful reminder that one day we too will need organizations to communicate effectively with older people.

### Writing

When referring in this guide to 'writing' for older people, I refer not to literary writing (which has a purpose beyond conveying a factual message); rather, I refer to business writing, the aim of which is to communicate clearly and unambiguously with the intended readers. In general, people read business text – for example adverts, instructions, reports and websites – not for pleasure or as a pastime but because they need or want to gain information. Indeed, it is sometimes known as 'informational text'. For this reason, they will not have endless patience with the material. Whereas the reader of literature may be happy to reread tricky parts and gradually work out the writer's intended meaning, it is important that the reader of business text can easily understand it at the first reading and without having to consult a dictionary. For simplicity, I use the term 'text' to refer to business/informational text in the rest of this guide.

## Effects of ageing

### Changes that occur to most people as they age

Although older people are no different from younger people in most ways, there are some physical and mental changes that occur naturally as the human body ages. In a 2004 article for the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, Anthea Tinker writes: 'There are

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[14] *Definition of an older or elderly person*: http://www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/ageingdefnolder/en/

clear markers of ageing in biology … and in psychology.'[15] Some of these can affect how easily the person can read and understand text. Key changes reported widely[16] include a decline in eyesight, in speed of processing information and in working memory (the brain system that temporarily stores and manipulates the information needed for complex mental tasks).

### *Conditions more common in older people*
On top of these natural changes that occur in most people as they age, the ability to read and understand text may be affected by health conditions that are more common in older age. These include not only dementia but also cataracts, macular degeneration, cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and chronic kidney disease.[17]

The King's Fund reports that long-term conditions are more prevalent in older people (58% of people over 60 compared to 14% under 40)[18]; many have three or more conditions. And the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) reports that, while about one in 30 people of all ages in the UK are living with sight loss, one in five people aged 75-plus and one in two aged 90-plus are doing so. Age-related macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in adults.

### *Medication*
Mental function can also be affected by medication: for example, chemotherapy (leading to the mental fog often termed 'chemo brain'), tranquillizers, sleeping pills, narcotics and antidepressants. Older people may be more likely to need these drugs, and to be prescribed multiple drugs at the same time. Moreover, older people are more likely to experience side effects, because the body's ability to clear drugs decreases with age (due to reduced kidney and liver function), and because the older brain is more sensitive to drugs that enter the central nervous system.[19] The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) states that 45% of the medications prescribed in the UK are for people aged 65-plus, and 36% of people aged 75-plus take four or more prescribed drugs.[20]

### *Effects on ability to read and understand information*
All these factors may make it harder for older people to:
- read small print
- perceive contrast between similar colours
- retain large volumes of information in the short term, for use in ongoing tasks
- do several things at the same time
- process information quickly
- focus their attention and deal with any distractions
- read between the lines and come to a conclusion
- be flexible in their thought processes.

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[15] 'When does old age start?': http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/gps.930080902/abstract
[16] For example, by James Hartley (1994) *Designing Instructional Text*, Kogan Page
[17] Mark Hochhauser (2012) 'Can sick patients understand informed consent?', *SoCRA Source*, November
[18] King's Fund, *Long-term conditions and multi-morbidity*: http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/time-to-think-differently/trends/disease-and-disability/long-term-conditions-multi-morbidity
[19] *Drug-induced Cognitive Impairment: Delirium and Dementia* (2014): http://www.worstpills.org/includes/page.cfm?op_id=459
[20] SCIE (2005) *SCIE Research briefing 15: Helping older people to take prescribed medication in their own home: what works?*: http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing15/

## Literacy levels

A report by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for Adult Literacy and Numeracy 'revealed the thinness of the evidence base on the literacy and numeracy of older adults'.[21] The information that is available seems to conflict with anecdotal evidence in this area.

The 2011 Census showed that people aged 65-plus were more likely to have no qualifications than those in the other age groups. Over half of the population (52.9%) aged 65-plus had no qualifications.[22] This was the only age group with a higher proportion of people reporting no qualifications as opposed to at least one qualification. Of course, having fewer qualifications may be explained by differences between the educational structures over time, and does not necessarily mean that older people read less well than their younger, more qualified counterparts.

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which began in 2002 and looks at people aged 50-plus, is the key source of information mentioned by the NRDC. Allocating respondents to three broad literacy levels (low, medium and high) according to test questions answered correctly, this study showed differences in literacy level by age. Nearly three-quarters of people in their 50s were in the high literacy group, but this fell steadily with age to less than half among people aged 80 and above. Conversely, only 8% of those in their fifties were in the low literacy group, rising to 12% among people in their 60s, 17% for people in their 70s and nearly 27% for those aged 80-plus.

It is unclear to what extent any lower literacy in older people has been lifelong or is due to changes brought about by ageing. Certainly, many people believe that the increased emphasis in the past on formal teaching of the English language and often of Latin (with emphasis on grammar, punctuation and spelling) – means older adults are (or have been) more literate, or at least have higher expectations that writing will be grammatically correct.

*'People in this age group generally had an exceptionally good education in written English (by today's standards). Even at primary school in the 1940s and 1950s, the teaching of formal English was hammered in pretty hard.'* Katherine James

*'Older people are often eagled-eyed in noticing any slips. I remember getting a caption wrong in a pensioners'[23] magazine, and received many letters pointing out my mistake! I'd received a blurry transparency of a World War II fighter plane and made the heinous mistake of labelling a Hurricane as a Spitfire. It did spark a whole new debate about readers' lives during the war, though.'* Alison Harmer

Whatever you believe the truth to be, it makes sense to assume that, if we want text to be easily understood by older people, we should ensure it does not exceed the average adult reading age in the UK. It is hard to know exactly what this is, but from the evidence that

[21] Andrew Jenkins, Rodie Ackerman, Lara Frumkin, Emma Salter and John Vorhaus (2011) *Literacy, Numeracy and Disadvantage Among Older Adults in England* (Final report for Nuffield Foundation), NRDC: http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=187#

[22] Office for National Statistics (2014): http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/local-area-analysis-of-qualifications-across-england-and-wales/sty-qualification-levels.html

[23] The NUJ advises that 'pensioner' should be used only when we are referring to pensions; in this case, Alison was working on a magazine for those receiving a pension from the client company

does exist, Plain Language Commission estimates 12 to 14 years.[24] In the USA, Doak, Doak and Root report that while the average reading age of American adults is 13 to 14 years, almost two out of five older Americans (defined as those aged 65-plus) have a reading age of less than 13.[25]

For any individual, literacy skills vary by context. For example, it is easier to read and understand written material when it is about a familiar topic and you are relaxed, and harder when the information is new and you are worried. Hence, it is particularly important to ensure that health information (e.g. consent forms) is completely clear.

*'Patient information is increasingly seen as an essential service in its own right, which enables people to understand and manage their own health, be fully involved in decisions, and choose treatment and support that are right for them.*
*'It is particularly important that older people, as the main users of health and care services, get the information they need, when they need it, and in a way that is meaningful and accessible. As an editor and writer, I challenge terminology and assumptions, and always look at things from the users' perspective.'* Vicky Burman

## Natural variation

Of course, we are all individuals: although it is generally true that older people will tend to have certain characteristics, there will always be others who do not fit into the typical pattern. This is equally true of younger people whose health, education and preferences mean they have more in common with older people than with their own contemporaries. For example, factors that influence the decline in mental functioning include genetic inheritance, long-term diseases, education, occupation, and the extent of the individual's ongoing participation in activities that provide mental stimulation.

Reflecting this natural variation in the older population, the WHO points out that people's calendar age is not necessarily the same thing as their biological age, and yet it is commonly used to mark the beginning of old age.[14]

### Not just one older generation
An additional dimension is that, as people live longer, the range of those aged 60-plus increases. Whereas, in the past, we would refer to 'the older generation', it is common for there now to be two generations aged 60-plus. With the number of people aged 100-plus now much higher than it used to be (13,780 in the UK in 2013[26], compared to just 102 in 1911[27]), there may even be three generations. For example, there is likely to be a big difference in the life experiences of people in their 60s, 80s and 100s – sometimes referred to as the 'young old', 'middle-aged old' and 'old old' – in familiarity with the internet and computer use.

*'Obviously, it's hard to generalize, as you could be writing for 65-year-olds or for a much older population, say in their 80s or 90s, so your audience should inform your writing.'* Jane Hammett

[24] Martin Cutts (2008) *Writing by Numbers: Are readability formulas to clarity what karaoke is to song?*: https://www.clearest.co.uk/articles#Readabilitytesting
[25] Cecilia Doak, Leonard Doak and Jane Root (1996) *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills*, JB Lippincott Company
[26] Office for National Statistics (2014) *Estimates of the Very Old (including Centenarians), 2002–2013*: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/mortality-ageing/estimates-of-the-very-old--including-centenarians-/2002---2013--england-and-wales--united-kingdom-/index.html
[27] Christian Nordqvist (2007) 'Ninety times more centenarians in UK than in 1911', *Medical News Today*: http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/84064.php

# 3. The solution: inclusive writing

## Writing for different audiences

Given this wide variety in older people's health, education and age, it may seem daunting (if not impossible) to write in a way that will suit all those aged 60-plus. The difficulty of writing to suit a range of older readers is exacerbated by the fact that many organizations also wish to target people under 60 with their adverts, instructions and so on.

Fortunately, many of the evidence-based guidelines on writing for older people produce text that appeals to others, too. These guidelines have much in common with the style commonly known as 'plain language'. This could also be called 'inclusive' or 'universal' writing, mirroring the terms 'inclusive design' and 'universal design' (also known as 'Design for All'), which describe an approach in which designers ensure that their products and services address the needs of the widest possible audience, regardless of age or ability. The British Standards Institute defines 'inclusive design' as 'the design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible ... without the need for special adaptation or specialised design'.[28]

This is the approach favoured by Age UK, which advocates that services and writing should be universally accessible. It is also the approach recommended by Health Canada:

> … adapting a message or medium for a senior audience helps everyone get more from it! What's more, in thinking about whether to single out older people with 'special' information products and communication approaches, consider the risks of alienating clients or customers by creating stigma, embarrassment or shame.[29]

USA-based usability expert Whitney Quesenbury was involved in an Open University project to design a website to provide information about admission. In an article about the experience, entitled 'More alike than we think', she writes:

> One complicating factor is the diversity of this audience … It's hard to imagine three audiences that seem further apart than teens, older adults, and people with difficulty reading. We had feared that we would find conflicting advice. But the advice we found was remarkably consistent, even looking closely at specific, diverse audiences.[30]

She concludes that, rather than providing different interfaces for different users, offering just one with 'information that was useful and usable to all visitors' proved the best solution.

Although writers may worry that writing in a clear, simple style will not suit all readers, research has found that it is rare for an able reader to complain that a text – for example, their insurance policy – was too easy to read! Also, able readers read difficult texts less competently when they are unmotivated, bored, stressed or rushed.

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[28] British Standards Institute (2005), *BS 7000-6:2005 Design Management Systems. Managing inclusive design. Guide*. BSI

[29] Health Canada (1999) *Communicating with Seniors: Advice, techniques and tips*: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/H88-3-26-1999E.pdf

[30] UXmatters (2006): http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2006/03/more-alike-than-we-think.php

> '*I think the most important point is that the older people I've had contact with on this topic simply want to know what's happening, and who should do what. Fashionable language tics just annoy them.*' Nigel Grant

Another worry of writers is that producing text in plain language may make them sound condescending or unintelligent. Yet there is evidence that readers prefer informational text written in this style, and in fact judge its writers to be more competent than those who use a more complex style and structure. For example, studies have found that readers assume that lawyers who use plain language come from more prestigious firms[31], and small-business owners liked the style of a plain-language booklet on tax, and did not think it condescending.[32] Indeed, another benefit of trying to write clearly is that it encourages the writer to think more clearly!

Other benefits of plain language include savings in time and money, and improved public and staff relations. In the USA, Professor Joseph Kimble has made it his life's work to concentrate on 'the writing guidelines that provide a route to clarity and simplicity, the false criticisms that stand in the way, and the mounting evidence that plain language pays off – considerably – in the end'.[33]

> '*I recently rewrote the key parts of standard patient letters issued by my local hospital. Common problems arising from the old ones were that older patients (and others) soon got caught in a loop of trying to phone the hospital or their GP for help to work out what they should do.*' Nigel Grant

Plain language also helps writers to think more clearly: you can only put your message into clear language if you have it straight in your own head.

> '*Part of the reason I became an editor is that, throughout my work and non-work life, I've been seeking clarity. I'm deeply sensitive to obfuscation, and I like to help others get the message across. Often this means going back to basics: what are we really trying to achieve here?*' Robin Black

## Guidelines for inclusive writing

> '*The whole problem is that many organizations addressing information to people of any age write in jargon and/or illiterately.*' Laura Hicks

Although the term 'plain language' suggests that it focuses only on the linguistic aspects of writing, most plain-language practitioners would assert that, to be fully effective, it must also look at other aspects of a text. For example, Plain Language Commission considers four areas (in addition to style and grammar) in deciding whether to accredit a text with its Clear English Standard logo:[34]

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[31] Joseph Kimble (1994–1995) 'Answering the critics of plain language', *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*: www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/critics.htm

[32] Elaine Kempson and Nick Moore (1994) *Designing Public Documents: A review of research*, Policy Studies Institute

[33] Having written two famous articles for *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* in the 1990s – 'Answering the critics of plain language' (1994–1995): www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/critics.htm; and 'Writing for dollars, writing to please' (1996–1997): http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/kimble/Writing1.pdf – Kimble in 2013 published a book, *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The case for plain language in business, government, and law* (Carolina Academic Press), which incorporates these and adds much new material.

[34] https://www.clearest.co.uk/document-accreditation

*Purpose*
- Is the purpose obvious or stated early and clearly?

*Content*
- Is the information accurate, relevant and complete, anticipating readers' questions and answering them?
- Are essential technical terms explained or defined?
- Is a contact point stated for readers who want to know more?

*Structure*
- Is the information well organized and easy to navigate through, with good headings and sub-headings?
- Is there good use of illustrations, diagrams and summary panels?

*Style and grammar*
- Is the style right for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15–20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs?
- Is the document free of pomposity, verbosity and officialese (no aforesaids, notwithstandings, herebys, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias)?
- Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?
- Is capitalization consistent in text and headings?
- In any contents page, are headings consistent with those in the text?

*Layout and design*
- Does the document look good?
- Is the type easily readable and is there enough space between lines of type?
- Is there a clear hierarchy of headings and spaces?
- Have emphasis devices, such as bold type, been used well?

Some people call this whole process of producing text – including testing it on target readers and revising it in light of their feedback – 'information design'.

### Guidelines not rules

Sometimes it seems that, whichever way we turn, people present us with (often ill-founded) rules for 'good' writing and 'correct' usage. But the advice contained in this guide is just that – advice (hence the term 'guidelines' as opposed to 'rules'). The guidelines suggest how to make text more easily understandable. Just as there is evidence showing the effectiveness of plain English as a whole, there is also evidence for each of the guidelines that together make up the overall approach. Each guideline for clear writing is based on research evidence.[35]

There may be times when there are good reasons to go against the guidelines. George Orwell, suggesting five rules for good writing, concluded these with a sixth: 'Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous.' The important thing is that, if you do go against the guidelines, you do so by design rather than by accident, and so can justify your decision. When describing guidelines, this guide gives examples of particular circumstances that may make it sensible to go against particular advice.

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[35] For example that summarised by Elaine Kempson and Nick Moore (1994), in *Designing Public Documents: A review of research*, Policy Studies Institute

## Structure of this guide

Chapters 3 to 6 look in detail at the plain-language guidelines. The expertise of editors lies primarily in enhancing text, and so it is this that I concentrate on here, though I do include some information (Chapter 7) on the basics of inclusive design. The guidelines work well for both hard-copy and electronic/web text, but Chapter 8 examines writing web text in more detail. Finally, Chapter 9 describes how to ensure that your resultant text is suitable for your intended audience, and Chapter 10 suggests how to acquire – or to commission – the skills described in Chapters 3 to 9.

A list of useful resources is provided at the end of each chapter but the ones listed in this chapter are relevant to the whole guide. For ease of reference, all of them are listed again at the end of this guide, in alphabetical order.

All examples used in the guide are drawn from real texts (both public and private sector) aimed at general audiences including older people, and are anonymized.

### Resources

**Plain language in general**
Although this list includes only UK books, as they are most relevant to British English, the plain-language movement is international, covering many languages other than English.

First published in 1954, *The Complete Plain Words* by Sir Ernest Gowers contains much advice still applicable today, as reflected in Gowers' mantra: 'Be simple, be short, be human.' The most recent revision, edited by Rebecca Gowers (his great-granddaughter) was published by Penguin in 2014. The book focuses on language and style, and does not cover the other elements of plain language.

The standard modern book for plain-English writers and editors in the UK, giving detailed advice on 30 plain-English guidelines (including real examples) is the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts (Oxford University Press – OUP, 2020).

Other publications look at specific fields and types of text:

*Healthcare*
- (For managers) Sarah Carr (2002) *Tackling NHS Jargon: Getting the message across*, Radcliffe Medical Press
- (For nurses) Ali Turnbull (2001) *Plain Words for Nurses: Writing and communicating effectively*, Foundation of Nursing Studies, 2001: http://www.fons.org/resources/documents/PlainWordsForNurses.pdf

*Law*
- Mark Adler and Daphne Perry (2017) *Clarity for Lawyers,* The Law Society

*Instructions*
- James Hartley (1994) *Designing Instructional Text*, Kogan Page [includes a section specifically on older readers]

*Forms*
- Caroline Jarrett (2000) 'Designing usable forms: the three-layer model of the form', *Proceedings of the Society of Technical Communication Conference*, Orlando, Florida: http://www.formsthatwork.com/files/Articles/DesigningUsableForms.pdf
- Caroline Jarrett and Gerry Gaffney (2008) *Forms that work: Designing web forms for usability*, Morgan Kaufmann
- Canadian Public Health Association (1998), *Creating Plain Language Forms for Seniors:* A guide for the public, private and not-for-profit sectors: http://www.cpha.ca/uploads/portals/h-l/pl_forms_seniors_e.pdf

Another very specialist area is signage; the Information Design Association is interested in this: http://www.infodesign.org.uk/

'Why edit?' (part of the SfEP's website that collects examples of what a difference good editing can make to a text in terms of clarity and readability) includes a section entitled 'Editing for plain English'. See http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/whyeditexamples/plainenglish/home.asp

## Writing for older people
To my knowledge, there are no UK publications that focus specifically on writing for older people. However, a number of guides are published in North America, some of which cover spoken as well as written communication:

*Canada*
- International Council on Active Aging (2011) *ICAA's Guidelines for Effective Communication with Older Adults*: http://www.icaa.cc/business/whitepapers/communicationguidelines.pdf
- Health Canada (1999) *Communicating with Seniors: Advice, techniques and tips*: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/H88-3-26-1999E.pdf

*USA*
- National Institute on Aging (2007) *Making Your Printed Health Materials Senior Friendly*: http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/making-your-printed-health-materials-senior-friendly
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2010) *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective* – Part 9: *Material for Older Adults*: http://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/ToolkitPart09.html

**Other**
Working with Age UK, Brunel University's Institute for Ageing Studies is researching solutions to tackle the problems associated with providing products and services for older people: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs/research/research-impact/improving-the-lives-of-ageing-consumers

# 4. Purpose, content and structure

## Purpose: why you are writing

Before you start writing, think through the following questions:

- Do you need to write at all? Is this the best method to convey the necessary information, or might there be a better way? For example, Canadian research has suggested that personal contact is older people's preferred source of health information, even for skilled readers.[36] Other methods include meetings, radio, television and video. Key advantages of text as a means of communicating information are that readers can absorb information at their own pace and retain the item for future reference.
- If text is the right medium, what form will it take? Examples of written media include printed documents, websites, emails, forms and posters. Bear in mind that although more older people are now using the internet, there are still more who do not than who do. Ofcom's *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2014* states that, while over eight in ten (83%) of adults now go online using any type of device in any location, only 42% of those aged 65-plus do so (versus 98% of those aged 16 to 34).[37]
- What do you want the text to achieve? For example, you may be trying to inform, confirm, persuade, explain, record, enquire, instruct, or do a mixture of these. Ideally, the purpose should be obvious, or stated early and clearly.
- Who is going to read it? Think about whether the reader may show it to someone else, for example a colleague, adviser (perhaps a lawyer or accountant), friend or relative.
- What does the intended reader already know?
- What does the reader need and want to know, and expect to get from the text?
- In what circumstances will the person be reading? For example, thinking about whether they use a computer would help you decide between a letter and an email. Or if the person might be reading in a wet environment (e.g. in the case of directions for a walk, or instructions for a shower), you could consider laminating the text.

People are more likely to read, understand and remember a text they find relevant to their needs, expectations and circumstances. If you are unsure about these, you could ask some members of the target audience or people in a similar position. Of course, this is not always practical – see Chapter 9 for more on involving users. At this stage, you also need to bear in mind any constraints, such as a deadline or a need for the text to be a certain length.

## Content: what you want to say

'*Many things are only obvious if you already know something about them.*' Sue Browning

As part of establishing the purpose, you have thought about what the recipient already knows, needs and wants to know, and expects to get from the text.

'*A retired RAF squadron leader sent me a copy of his investment company's report. He wrote with feeling: "All I need to know is whether to sell my shares."*' Nigel Grant

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[36] Burt Perrin (1998) *How Does Literacy Affect the Health of Canadians?: A Profile Paper*, presented to Policy Development and Coordination Division, Health Promotion and Programs Branch, Health Canada
[37] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/research-publications/adults/adults-media-lit-14/

If you are not sure about the audience's needs, you can always ask them – see Chapter 9. Remember that:

- your message may be familiar to you but is probably much less so to your readers; the findings of memory studies suggest that text about an unfamiliar topic (such as how to operate a new type of equipment) is likely to cause particular problems, and will need to be presented even more clearly
- the more motivated people are to read a text, the easier they will find it.

*'If possible, choose subject matter that will be interesting and relevant to your audience: for example, Remembrance Day, timeshares for older people, holiday ideas, social clubs or how to avoid loneliness.'* Jane Hammett

Now it is time to plan the content accordingly. Unless you are writing a very simple text (say, a short letter or email with fewer than six points), it is better to plan on paper or the computer screen, rather than just in your head. It helps to be able to see your points, assess their strength and relevance, and group them appropriately. Some people find it useful to work through the following stages:

- Write down – in any order – all the points you are thinking of making. You can list them, which is easy if you are working on screen. Or if you like to plan on paper, a useful technique is the bubble diagram. This involves jotting down your points, each in a 'bubble'. For an average letter or email, for example, you would need 10 to 15 bubbles.
- Look through and cross out the irrelevant or unnecessary points. Try to make yourself leave out any unnecessary detail.
- Check that your remaining points are accurate, and in keeping with your organization's policy and the law.
- Link your points into groups of related ones. These will become paragraphs.

Ideally, agree a clear and honest message that the audience needs and/or wants to know. If you are producing text on behalf of a group, or that will have to be approved by a manager or committee, agreeing the message before you start is especially important. Sharing your list of points (or bubble diagram) at this stage could save you time, effort and frustration later.

*'The consistent message I have had (from retired people from a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds) is that they dislike anything that smacks of business jargon, false enthusiasm, empty promises and vagueness. These people all have a lot of experience of life and don't want to be flannelled or confused by, say, bank or utility company or medical communication.'* Nigel Grant

For most plain-language writers and editors, the satisfaction of using plain language – apart from producing concise, clear text that is beautiful in itself – derives from its altruism. It is about helping readers to realize their rights (and responsibilities) by ensuring that they understand informational text, whether produced by the private or the public sector. Although it is perfectly possible to produce dishonest or misleading information in plain language, few would regard this as good practice. Instead, ensure that the information provided is accurate, relevant and complete.

It is always a good idea to give a contact point for readers who want to know more. Provide options for means of contact, e.g. telephone number, website and email address.

> *'Be careful about using too many references to social media, computing and so on – not all older people have a computer/mobile phone, so may not be able to easily access websites etc.'* Jane Hammett

Avoid including cross-references to other texts or concepts unless you are sure that your audience is familiar with these and needs/wants them.

> *'Be careful that any references to popular culture will actually mean something to your target audience. There's generally little point in mentioning Lady Gaga in an article aimed at older people – instead, how about Andy Williams, James Galway or whoever else would be appropriate for the type of document you are writing?'*
> Jane Hammett

## Structure: how you organize the content

As always, it is important to think of the reader when you are deciding the structure. Readers may be busy people with neither the time nor inclination to plough through a poorly structured text to find the information they need. If they have not specifically asked for the information, they may not even bother. Your text will end up in the (actual or virtual) recycling bin.

When you are writing a text, think about two levels of structure: the overall structure, and the structure of individual paragraphs.

### Overall structure

Many people were taught to write using a traditional structure, which is sometimes known as IMRAD, an acronym for **i**ntroduction, **m**ethod, **r**esults **a**nd **d**iscussion. The model may help writers but is not reader-friendly. The main message – the interesting part – is at the end, which is not logical.

In contrast, the 'top-heavy triangle' puts the main message at the start. Journalists use this structure, which is also known as the 'news triangle'. The idea is that your best chance of being read is to put your most interesting information at the top, followed by all the supporting information in order of importance. The top-heavy triangle is particularly useful for emails, where limited screen space means readers often cannot see the end when they first open it. The important information is immediately visible on the reader's screen. If you are emailing, you could send a short covering note and attach the full text (or link to a website). But do this only if it really helps you to get your message across clearly, not just because it is quicker for you. It is all too easy to include an attachment just because you can. Also bear in mind that the recipient's computer may have trouble receiving and opening a large attachment.

Other overall structures include the following:
- **Problem–cause–solution** states a problem, then the cause, and finally what should happen in the future.
- **Chronological order** follows the order in time of a series of actions or events.
- **Question-and-answer structure** helps to split the information into small chunks, and makes the reader feel involved.
- **Correspondent's order** can be useful when replying to someone who has sent a letter or email. It answers the points or questions in the same order that the correspondent asked them.

Remember that every text is different. Get ideas from these overall structures, but do not try to force your writing into one of them. Use whatever model – or combination of models – seems best to put your message across to the reader.

Whatever overall structure you choose, group related ideas together and present information in a logical order. Think of how to help the audience find their way around the text. Examples of such 'navigational aids' include contents pages, purpose statements, executive summaries, numbers (for pages and/or sections), headings, headers and footers (i.e. text that appears at the top or bottom of all pages belonging to a certain section) and indexes.

'*Tact is a great characteristic to have if you're the editor of a pensioners' magazine. When I took over the editing of a corporation's publication in the 1990s, I moved the retirements page well away from the deaths column. It was a popular move. Readers felt it was depressing to read about people retiring in one column, only to find their names on the opposite page, however many years later.*' Alison Harmer

### Structure of individual paragraphs
Again, whatever overall structure you choose, it is a good idea to use the top-heavy triangle to order your points in individual paragraphs. Start the paragraph with your main message, and then follow this with any supporting points.

Keep paragraphs and sections reasonably short. Around 100 words per paragraph is about right on average – so about four or five sentences. But it is fine to have some variety in paragraph length. It is a myth that you must not write a one-sentence paragraph – if you have expressed your idea in a single sentence, just stop there and move on to a new paragraph. If you use the grammar-checker in your word-processing package, the readability statistics it gives after checking (see Chapter 9) may well include the average number of sentences per paragraph.

## Resources

You can read more about planning effectively and using reader-centred structure in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts (OUP, 2020).

'Why edit?' (part of the SfEP's website that collects examples of what a difference good editing can make to a text in terms of clarity and readability) includes a section entitled 'Structure'. See http://sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/whyeditexamples/structure/home.asp.

# 5. Style and grammar 1: words and phrases

*'I'd suggest the same general approach applies here as for schoolbooks: keep it simple, grammatical and unambiguous.'* Katherine James

## Different ways of presenting information

Chapter 4 advised thinking, before writing, whether the message would be better delivered using a different medium. Even once you have decided that text is the way to go, it is important to think whether simple graphics (such as tables, pictures, graphs and diagrams) may communicate your message more clearly than words (or than words alone). There's more on using photos in Chapter 7.

Given the wide range of possible graphics, and different audiences, there are no simple rules to help you predict what your audience will find useful. Also, cultural differences can cause particular problems in interpreting graphics. Again, you need to seek expert advice, and ideally to test the graphics on members of the target audience – see Chapter 9.

## Omitting redundant words

You can often remove some words altogether, without detracting from your message. This instantly shortens your text. When writing, try to look critically at it, removing words and seeing whether the meaning is really affected.

For example, these sentences can be considerably shortened by omitting redundant words:

> **Example 1 (before):** Older people have said that, given the option, they want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, and have care that is personalized according to their own individual needs and preferences.
> **Example 1 (after):** Older people have said they want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible, and have personalized care.
>
> **Example 2 (before):** The purpose of the plan is to improve services for older people, taking account of the inequalities that exist in the city, and respond to the anticipated increase in demand for services as more people live longer, and there is therefore more pressure on resources.
> **Example 2 (after):** The purpose of the plan is to improve services for older people, taking account of inequalities in the city, and respond to the anticipated increase in demand for services as more people live longer.

The following are some examples of words and phrases that you can often get rid of without changing your message:

- absolutely
- actually
- at the end of the day
- a total of
- basically
- current
- currently
- existing
- in actual fact
- in due course
- in other words
- in the process of
- in total
- in view of the fact that it should be appreciated that
- obviously
- of course
- quite
- to all intents and purposes
- totally
- very

## Using short, familiar words and phrases

Do not expect readers to consult the dictionary. Even if they have one handy, they will probably not have the time or inclination to do so, and your message will be lost.

Generally speaking, shorter words are more familiar (and so easier to read) than longer ones. Of the most frequent 200 words in British English, 174 have one syllable, 24 have two syllables and only two have three syllables.[38] In Example 2 above, you could replace *anticipated* with *expected (*and possibly *increase* with *rise*, although *increase* is not particularly long or unfamiliar).

Another feature to avoid is long noun strings (for example, *employee consultation scheme manual*). These place an undue burden on the reader's working memory, and often require some thought to disentangle the meaning.

### *Exceptions*
As with all guidelines, there are exceptions:
- Some longer words may be familiar to most people (for example, *immediately*, *encourage*, *honesty*, *suspicious*, *practical* and *benefit*). Longer words like these are fine to use, if you are sure they really will be familiar to all members of your target audience. But if there is a shorter word, you may as well use this, as it is likely to be even easier to understand. In Examples 1 and 2, *personalized* and *inequalities* are examples of long words that are not terribly difficult and cannot be easily replaced.
- Sometimes a long or unfamiliar word is the only one that can explain exactly what you mean. For example, you may need to use a technical term. I look at this in the next section.
- Some words may be short but unfamiliar. This includes many foreign words, particularly Latin ones, which you should avoid using. Some (for example, *vice versa*, *per cent* and *etc.*) have become so common that most people understand them. But others (such as *per se*, *sic* and *ceteris paribus*) are less well understood. Foreign plurals can also be tricky for many readers – so it is clearer to write, for example, *indexes* than *indices*, *forums* than *fora*, and *focuses* than *foci*.

### *Knowing what is familiar*
Knowing what words and phrases are familiar to your target audience is not always easy. It may help to think how you would express your meaning in everyday conversation. But do remember that older people in particular may not be familiar with new words and phrases, such as slang and textspeak (such as *BTW* – by the way; and *FYI* – for your information). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) website provides regular updates on new words, sub-entries and meanings.[39] Most hazardous of all these are the new meanings: rather than realizing they do not understand the word, readers may misunderstand it, and so get entirely the wrong end of the stick. So be especially careful with established words that have recently acquired a different meaning.

*Gay* would have been an example of such a word before the mid-twentieth century[40] (originally meaning light-hearted or brightly coloured – and later homosexual), and more recently the noun *mobil*e as a noun (originally referring to a ceiling-mounted decoration –

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[38] Stephan Gramley and Kurt-Michael Pätzold (2003) *A Survey of Modern English*, Routledge
[39] *Recent updates to the OED*: http://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/
[40] Twelve other current words that used to mean something quite different are discussed in *The Huffington Post*: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/words-that-have-changed-meaning_n_4847343.html

and now usually a mobile phone). New words that have taken on other, quite different, meanings include *vine* (meaning what grapes grow on, and a short video clip posted on social websites) and *clutch* (referring to a small handbag as well as the older meanings of a tight grasp, car part and group of eggs/chicks). The March 2014 update to the *OED* also refers to *tick-tock*: originally referring just to the sound made by a clock, it now also means a work of journalism that presents a detailed chronology of events as well as indicating that time is passing.

> '*William Taft (US President at the start of the 20th century) said: "Don't write so that you can be understood, write so that you can't be misunderstood." I have adapted this slightly to use on my publicity: "To my mind, the only thing as important as ensuring writing can be understood is ensuring it cannot be misunderstood."* Fiona Eadie

Short, familiar words tend to be of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) rather than Romance (Latin) origin. Of the 1,000 most frequent English words, 83% are Anglo-Saxon.[38] If you have studied some German (or perhaps Dutch or a Scandinavian language), you may be able to identify English words that are similar to words from those languages; they are often of Anglo-Saxon origin. Similarly, English words that are similar to French, Spanish or Italian words are often of Romance origin.

Another way to find simpler equivalents to long words is to use a thesaurus – or, even better, there are various word lists that give plain-English alternatives; for example, Plain English Campaign's *The A to Z of Alternative Words* and Plain Language Commission's *Plain English Lexicon*. The latter provides information on the familiarity and frequency of the 2,700 words it covers, drawing on two pieces of research evidence: the American *Living Word Vocabulary*[41] and the British National Corpus (BNC).

The BNC is also useful for comparing the prevalence of words. For example, we might think that *inequalities* (in Example 2) could be replaced by the shorter word *inequities*. Yet a search of the BNC produces 656 examples of the longer word and only 33 of the shorter; this suggests that *inequalities* is more familiar.

If in doubt about whether your audience will understand a particular word or phrase, you could ask some of its members – see Chapter 9.

### *Elegant variation*
One of the 'rules' that many people were taught by their high-school English teachers was that it was 'bad English' to use the same word twice within some randomly defined area – be it a sentence, several lines, or the same paragraph. Henry Watson Fowler referred to this as 'elegant variation'. It is true that repetition can lead to an unnecessarily wordy style. But it is always better to repeat a word than to use synonyms that are longer or less familiar, or that may make the reader wonder whether you are talking about the same thing or something different.

For example, in the following paragraph, *older people* is unnecessarily replaced by the longer-winded (and less appropriate) *elderly individuals*. Using *older people* again would be perfectly acceptable, and much clearer.

> **Example 3 (before):** The health of older people often deteriorates gradually, giving some opportunity for crisis prevention. There is said to be a need for a simple

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[41] by Edgar Dale and Joseph O'Rourke (1981), World Book/Childcraft International

method of targeting the subgroup of elderly individuals who are at particular risk and on whom preventive programmes should focus.

**Example 3 (after):** The health of older people often deteriorates gradually, giving some opportunity for crisis prevention. There is said to be a need for a simple method of targeting the subgroup of older people who are at particular risk and on whom preventive programmes should focus.

In this sentence, you could also omit the redundant words *the subgroup of* and *who are*, and change the long words *deteriorates* and *opportunity* to the shorter *gets worse* and *chance*.

## Tackling jargon and abbreviations

'*These days, the jargon is often at best intolerable, at worst incomprehensible. Keep the vocabulary simple – or at least explain any technical terms simply at first mention*.'
Katherine James

'Jargon' can be defined as terms used by a particular group that are difficult for other people to understand. They often take the form of abbreviations. It is all too easy, when writing, to forget that terms that are familiar to us may not be to others. As with long, unfamiliar words, do not rely on people to look up terms elsewhere or to ask for an explanation. Most will either not bother or be too embarrassed to do this.

If it is possible to omit jargon and abbreviations without losing meaning or making the text more long-winded, by all means do so. But these tend to serve as a form of professional shorthand and so do have value in expressing meaning concisely and precisely. From an ethical viewpoint, including technical terms can empower readers – just as a doctor would use the medical term for a condition when diagnosing a patient, so that the latter could look it up, talk to friends and family about it, etc.

The important thing is to briefly explain any jargon you use, in plain English, in brackets straight after the term – as I did here in Chapter 2: 'Key changes include a decline in eyesight, in speed of processing information and in working memory (the brain system that temporarily stores and manipulates the information needed for complex mental tasks).' In Example 3, you may wish to explain *preventive programmes*.

You can then expand on these brief explanations in a glossary if more detail is necessary. If your organization produces a lot of texts that include technical terms, it may be worth agreeing a common set of plain-English explanations. These could be included in your style guide (see Chapter 6) and/or on a computer drive that everyone has access to.

Exactly the same guidance applies to the writing-out in full of acronyms and abbreviations: do so the first time people are likely to come across them. Put the short form in brackets immediately afterwards.

Think about whether you should re-explain a term – or re-expand an abbreviation – used again in the text. This is often useful in a text that is longer (so avoiding overburdening the reader's working memory), or that may be 'dipped into' rather than read from beginning to end.

As with unfamiliar words, remember that misunderstanding is worse than not understanding at all – so be cautious with terms that are made up of ordinary words but

that you are using with a different, specialist meaning. For example, in an NHS survey[42], *primary care* (care provided by GPs, dentists, pharmacists and opticians) was interpreted by 36% of respondents to mean life-saving services and by a further 18% to mean care delivered to children under 11.

> '*I used to belong to a panel of readers commenting on patient information produced by our local hospital. A battle I continually waged was to try to persuade them not to use the word "discharge" in a document to mean both "go home from hospital" and "the stuff that might leak out of a surgery wound".*' Annie Jackson

Also be wary of abbreviations that have another (sometimes better-known) meaning, e.g. *STD* for sexually transmitted disease as well as subscriber trunk dialling (as in *STD code* for a telephone number), and *CBT* for compulsory basic training (to ride a motorbike) and cognitive behavioural therapy (a psychological therapy).

Again, if in doubt about whether your audience will understand – or want to understand – a particular piece/category of jargon or abbreviation, you could ask some of its members – see Chapter 9.

## Referring to people

Paying attention to equality in language is an essential part of plain language. Because language powerfully influences attitudes, behaviours and perceptions[43], using fair language helps bring about a fairer world. Principles aside, it makes little business sense to offend your readers. If they are annoyed by some apparent prejudice in your text, they will be distracted from what you are trying to say and so fail to take in your message.

Getting it right in this area is not always straightforward, but there is specialist guidance that can help (listed in 'Resources' at the end of this chapter). *The Golden Economy* (Age UK, 2010) recommends: 'Marketing professionals and journalists should follow existing guidelines on the language and imagery used to represent and describe older people.'

Particularly useful in this regard are the *NUJ guidelines on reporting age*:
- Mention a person's age only if strictly relevant.
- Do not portray old age as necessarily a time of dependence and limitation.
- Avoid offensive and undermining stereotyping of older people.
- Refer to a 'gran' or 'granddad' only if the person's role as a grandparent is central to the piece.
- Use 'pensioner' (not 'OAP') only when you are referring to pensions (as in Alison Harmer's examples in Chapters 2 and 4).

The online *Guardian and Observer* style guide also provides useful advice. It includes the interesting idea that, when writing about retired people, you should refer to the job that the older person used to do:

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[42] North West Anglia Health Authority (1998) *The Health of Wisbech: communications and information questionnaire carried out by the Public Engagement Group: report of findings*
[43] See the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which holds that the structure of a language affects the world view of its users: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistic_relativity

**pensioners**

not "old age pensioners" or "OAPs"; older people is preferable to "elderly people" or (even worse) "the elderly".

While this term is useful in headlines, it should be avoided in text as a description of an individual. As one of our readers notes: "This usage defines older people by their non-participation in the workforce and immediately typifies them as dependants or drains on the public purse. Rupert Murdoch and Michael Caine are never described as 'pensioners' because they are perceived as still contributing to the economy, so does the term only apply to the little people?" Reporters should ask what job people used to do and then describe them as a retired banker/powerboat racer or former whatever (including homemaker) [44]

*ICAA's Guidelines for effective communication with older adults* include the following lists. Of course, cultural differences between North America and the UK may make these not directly transferable, but they are nonetheless a useful guide.

| Words and phrases to avoid: | Words and phrases to avoid or use sparingly: | Preferred words and phrases: |
|---|---|---|
| • Anti-aging<br>• Aged<br>• Codger, geezer, and similar<br>• Grandmotherly<br>• 'he looks good for his age'<br>• 'despite her age ...'<br>• 'even older adults can ...'<br>• 'is active even at that age ...' | • Senior (may be appropriate for people 70 years or older in certain circumstances)<br>• Senior (considered old-fashioned and stereotypical: is never appropriate for people at approximately 65 years and younger)<br>• Golden, silver<br>• Golden agers<br>• The elderly (may be used for a group, e.g. concern for the elderly)<br>• Elderly (do not apply to an individual)<br>• Senior citizens<br>• Retiree (do not use as a noun; more accurate is 'people who are retired')<br>• Middle age (do not use as a noun: more acceptable is 'people in middle age')<br>• Third age (this term is not widely recognized) | • Adults aged 60 and older<br>• People aged 55 and older<br>• People with dementia<br>• People in middle age<br>• Aging adults<br>• Midlife<br>• Older adults<br>• Older persons<br>• Older people<br>• Older patients<br>• Older population<br>• Prime time<br>• Experience, experienced<br>• Independent<br>• Mentor, coach |

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[44] http://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-p; thanks to SfEP member Alison Harmer for bringing this to my attention

**Resources**

In the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts (OUP, 2020), you can read more about:
- using alternatives to words in Chapter 23
- omitting redundant words in Chapter 5
- using short, familiar words in Chapter 4.

Plain English Campaign's *The A to Z of Alternative Words* (2001) and Plain Language Commission's *Plain English Lexicon* (2011) are free to download at www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf and https://www.clearest.co.uk/plain-english-lexicon respectively.

The BNC is a 100-million-word searchable collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/

This article summarizes (from the book by this guide's author) how to deal with technical terms in plain-language text:
Sarah Carr (2006) 'Technical jargon: an approach, an idea and an offering', *Clarity* 55, May: http://clarity-international.net/journals/55.pdf

Rosalie Maggio's book *Talking About People: a guide to fair and accurate language* (Oryx Press, 1997) is particularly comprehensive, as it covers all areas of prejudice. It also includes research evidence showing the importance of avoiding prejudice in language.

NUJ (2006) *NUJ guidelines on reporting age*: http://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-guidelines-on-reporting-age/

# 6. Style and grammar 2: sentences

## Grammar, spelling and punctuation

Good grammar, accurate spelling and correct punctuation are vital to ensuring your text is unambiguous, to presenting a professional image of the individual or organization producing the text, and to avoiding distracting readers from concentrating on the message itself.

If you are not confident in these areas, you could attend a course; for example. SfEP's 'Brush up your grammar' (available both as a classroom-based and online course). It may also be useful to read and refer to relevant books – you will find many recommended in the 'Editorial guides' section of the SfEP review of books. Treat with caution the grammar-checkers in word-processing packages. For all their clever features, computers are poor at understanding language. If you are unfamiliar with grammar rules, you will not know when the checker is giving wrong advice (as they often do). A far better bet would be to use a professional editor/proofreader.

*'People in this age group like to see good written English, with apostrophes, commas and semi-colons used correctly.'* Katherine James

## Writing short sentences

*'I'd say that you should keep sentences fairly short so that older people can follow them easily.'* Jane Hammett

The longer a sentence, the more that readers have to concentrate, putting a greater burden on their working memory. Also, long sentences tend to contain more complex structures, which again need more effort to process because the reader must remember more information in order to understand the whole sentence. The Gerontological Society of America[45] reports that older adults also produce less grammatically complex sentences, probably as a result of a decline in the capacity of their working memory (though this relates to spoken rather than written language).

Sentences should be an average of 15 to 20 words, with some longer and some shorter for variety and effect. For example, shorter sentences are useful for emphasis. In each sentence, make one or perhaps two points. You can use the grammar-checker in Microsoft Word to check your average sentence length (see Chapter 9).

Omitting redundant words, and using short, familiar words will help reduce your average sentence length. Two other techniques are also useful: splitting longer sentences and using vertical lists.

### Splitting longer sentences
You can split sentences that are made up of two or more clauses into a larger number of shorter sentences:

> **Example 4 (before):** The independent sector is a committed partner to the change fund and reshaping care strategy for the city and the involvement of the

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[45] *Communicating With Older Adults: An Evidence-Based Review of What Really Works* (2012): http://www.lasell.edu/Documents/talk-of-ages/GSA_Communicating-with-Older-Adults-low-Final.pdf

independent sector in the development and implementation of the ten year vision and associated implementation plans is a key ingredient to the success of the reshaping of care.
**Example 4 (after):** The independent sector is a committed partner to the change fund and reshaping care strategy for the city. The involvement of the independent sector in the development and implementation of the ten year vision and associated implementation plans is a key ingredient to the success of the reshaping of care.

In terms of the words and phrases used in this example, you could delete plenty. Also, *private sector* would be more familiar (and so clearer) than *independent sector*; and *supports* better than *is a committed partner to*. You could improve clarity further with the use of hyphens: 'The private sector supports the change fund and reshaping-care strategy for the city. The involvement of the private sector in developing and implementing the ten-year vision is key to reshaping care.'

### Using (vertical) lists

You can rearrange a sentence that contains a list of items into a shorter 'platform statement' and bullet points:

**Example 5 (before):** The Older People's Service Framework sets standards aimed at improving the health and well-being of older people, their carers and their families by promoting social inclusion, reducing inequalities in health and social well-being, and improving the quality of care.
**Example 5 (after):** The Older People's Service Framework sets standards aimed at improving the health and well-being of older people, their carers and their families by:
- promoting social inclusion
- reducing inequalities in health and social well-being
- improving the quality of care.

Example 2 is another sentence that contains a list (of two items); this could again be changed into a vertical-list structure. And the second sentence of Example 3 could be split in two.

## Using strong verbs

Many nouns are formed from verbs; for instance (from the second sentence of Example 4):
- *involvement* from the verb *to involve*
- *development* from the verb *to develop*
- *implementation* from the verb *to implement*
- *reshaping* from the verb *to reshape*.

The technical term for this sort of noun, made from a verb, is a 'nominalization' or 'deverbal noun'. Nominalizations tend to be abstract nouns, and make your writing long-winded and less engaging – and less easy to read and process. So try instead to put your meaning into verbs.

**Example 6 (before):** We will seek to increase and expand the ways in which people are involved in the development of our strategies, plans and policies. We will also seek to increase their involvement in making decisions on budget allocation, service commissioning, and service funding.

**Example 6 (after):** We will seek to increase and expand the ways in which people are involved in developing our strategies, plans and policies. We will also seek to involve them more in deciding about allocating budgets, commissioning services, and funding services.

In this sentence, you could also delete the redundant words *and expand*. In Example 2, you could replace the deverbal noun *purpose* with the verb *to aim* (which is more familiar than the verb *to purpose*). In Example 3, you could use the verbs *to prevent* and *to need* instead of the deverbal nouns *prevention* and *a need*. The four deverbal nouns in the second sentence of Example 4 can all be replaced with their verb counterparts.

## Using active verbs

When a verb is active, the sentence always includes the person or thing doing the action (which we can call the 'doer'). This is followed by the verb, and then the person or thing that is on the receiving end of the action (the 'receiver'). For example, the following sentence is active:

| Doer | Verb | Receiver |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The manager | wrote | a letter. |

When a verb is passive, the receiver comes first, followed by the verb. The doer may or may not then be included.

You can also spot a passive by the form of words used. A passive verb always includes part of the verb *to be* (*am*, *are*, *is*, *be*, *being*, *was*, *were* or *been*), followed by a past participle – which you can usually spot by its *-ed* or *-en* ending. If the doer is included, it is introduced by the word *by*. For example, the passive version of the sentence analysed above would be:

| Receiver | Verb | Doer |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A letter | was written | by the manager. |

But you could also miss off the doer:

| Receiver | Verb | Doer |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A letter | was written. | |

Active verbs are more consistent with plain language because:
- they usually use fewer words, so leading to shorter sentences
- they make the text more personal and human, by always including the doer
- stating the doer (and so being explicit about who is responsible for the action) is consistent with the plain-language values of openness and honesty
- the word order places less strain on the reader's working memory.

If possible, try to convert passive to active verbs, asking yourself who or what is performing the action (there may already be a *by* phrase in the sentence telling you), and starting the sentence with this:

**Example 7 (before):** The challenge that is faced by us all is to ensure that the company's products are promoted by sales staff at every opportunity.

**Example 7 (after):** The challenge that we all face is to ensure that sales staff promote the company's products at every opportunity.

In Example 6, you could change the passive *people are involved* into the active *we involve*. It may be possible to simplify the verb phrase even further; for example, here in Example 7, you could refer to just *Our challenge*. Also, instead of *at every opportunity*, you could say *whenever* [or *as often as*] *they can*.

You can use Microsoft Word to check what percentage of your verbs is passive (see Chapter 9.) If this is over 50%, check them to see if you really need so many.

Although it makes sense to favour active verbs where you can, there are times when the passive is better, for example when the doer is irrelevant, unimportant, obvious or unknown (e.g. 'The company was established in 1972'); and when starting with the receiver makes your message clearer and punchier (e.g. 'Abuse, aggression and violence towards staff will not be tolerated').

## Achieving a human and positive tone

### *Making your writing human*
If you can, write in the 'first person'. That is, use the words *I*, *me*, *we* and *us* to refer to yourself or your team, department or organization. This makes your text sound more human. Addressing readers in the 'second person' (calling them *you*) will also help the text sound more directly relevant to them, and so will grab and hold their interest and attention. So instead of writing 'The company wants its customers to enjoy reading this newsletter', write 'We want you to enjoy reading this newsletter'. Using the first and second person fits well with using strong verbs and the active voice.

### *Making your writing positive*
Putting your points negatively makes them harder for the audience to understand. It can take some time to work out the meaning of statements that contain negative words, particularly if there is more than one. (For example, 'It is not unlikely that no rain will have a negative effect on crops' would be clearer as 'It is likely that no rain will affect crops badly.') Readers have to stop and mentally 'cross out' negatives to see whether they are left with a positive or negative statement. If they get it wrong, they will completely misunderstand your message.

While some negative words are obvious (e.g. *not*, *none*, *no*, *except*, *less*, *few*, *fewer*, *neither* and *nor*), others may start with a negative prefix (such as *un-*, *ab-*, *in-*, *im-* and *dis-*) or have negative associations (e.g. *stop*, *end*, *decrease*, *lack*, *reduce*, *reduction*, *avoid*, *avoidance*, *cease*, *cessation*, *close down*, *shut down* and *shortage*).

Try to phrase your points positively where you can. For example, the following sentence is clearer when rephrased positively:

**Example 8 (before):** The strategy will not lead to a diminution of existing core service provision.
**Example 8 (after):** The strategy will safeguard existing core service provision.

In Example 5 too, you could change *reducing inequalities* (a phrase comprising two negative words) to *increasing equality*.

In some situations a negative does convey your meaning better. One example of this is in commands not to do something, such as 'Never talk about what you did in your old organization' or 'Don't touch the electric socket!' These sentences would lose much of their impact if rephrased positively: 'Always keep quiet about what you did in your old organization' and 'Keep your hand away from the electric socket!'

## Developing a style guide

Style guides provide an agreed approach to all areas of language use where there is no absolute right or wrong (e.g. the use of capital and lower-case letters, and how to express numbers in text). Their main purpose is to make consistent the communications coming from one organization. You can either develop your own style guide or you can agree to use a published style guide (see the 'Editorial guides' section of the SfEP review of books). The SfEP Guide *Your House Style: Styling your words for maximum impact*, by Christina Thomas, describes how to construct a style guide.

If you create your own style guide, you can also include plain-language guidelines. This is a good way of recording these centrally, for everyone in the organization to refer to. Some editors offer editorial consultancy to help organizations in creating style guides.

## Special needs

The plain-language guidelines will work well for most types of readers. However, some groups of readers may need the language to be adapted. For example, when writing in English for people whose first language is not English, it is clearer to avoid idioms – including 'phrasal verbs' that have multiple meanings or a meaning that is not literal; for example, *to bring up* (which can mean to raise a child, to start talking about something or to vomit). As mentioned in Chapter 5, cultural differences can also cause problems in interpreting graphics.

Some readers may need text to be translated into their own language: do use a translator who is aware of and supports plain language. Plain-language guidelines exist for many languages, but may be quite different from those presented here for English, as grammar and thought patterns (and so the organization of written text) vary between different languages.

Again, if in doubt about how easy something is to understand, check with members of the target audience or an editor (see Chapter 9). There may also be organizations and publications (see 'Resources' at the end of this chapter) that can provide information on writing for specific groups, such as those with dementia and those with low literacy.

'*Writing for people with dementia requires a specific approach. The language has to be structured with sufficient clarity, repetition and familiarity without making the reader feel they are being treated like a child. The subject matter has to engage and if possible help them with everyday strategies for coping. They may read it over and over again or get tired of it very quickly, depending on the nature of the dementia.*' Sandi Irvine

# Bringing it all together

Applying all the guidelines described in this and the previous chapter gives the following example sentences:

| Example | Before | After |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Older people have said that, given the option, they want to stay in their own home for as long as possible, and to have care that is personalized according to their own individual needs and preferences. | Older people have said they want to stay in their own home for as long as possible, and to have personalized care. |
| 2 | The purpose of the plan is to improve services for older people, taking account of the inequalities that exist in the city, and to respond to the anticipated increase in demand for services as more people live longer, and there is more pressure on resources. | The plan aims to:<br>• improve services for older people, taking account of inequalities in the city<br>• respond to the expected rise in demand for services as more people live longer. |
| 3 | The health of older people often deteriorates gradually, giving some opportunity for crisis prevention. There is said to be a need for a simple method of targeting the subgroup of elderly individuals who are at particular risk and on whom preventive programmes should focus. | The health of older people often gets worse gradually, giving us some chance to prevent crises. We need a simple method of targeting older people at particular risk. We can then focus preventive programmes (schemes to prevent ill health) on this group. |
| 4 | The independent sector is a committed partner to the change fund and reshaping care strategy for the city and the involvement of the independent sector in the development and implementation of the 10 year vision and associated implementation plans is a key ingredient to the success of reshaping care. | The private sector supports the change fund and reshaping-care strategy. To reshape care, we must involve the private sector in building and putting into place the 10-year vision. |
| 5 | The Older People's Service Framework sets standards aimed at improving the health and well-being of older people, their carers and their families by promoting social inclusion, reducing inequalities in health and social well-being, and improving the quality of care. | The Older People's Service Framework sets standards aimed at improving the health and well-being of older people, their carers and their families by:<br>• promoting social inclusion<br>• increasing equality in health and social well-being<br>• improving the quality of care. |

| 6 | We will seek to increase and expand the ways in which people are involved in the development of our strategies, plans and policies. We will also seek to increase their involvement in making decisions on budget allocation, service commissioning, and service funding. | We will seek to involve people more in: <br> • developing our strategies, plans and policies <br> • deciding about sharing out budgets, and choosing and funding services. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 7 | The challenge that is faced by us all is to ensure that the company's products are promoted by sales staff at every opportunity. | Our challenge is to ensure that sales staff promote the company's products as often as they can. |
| 8 | The strategy will not lead to a diminution of existing core service provision. | The strategy will safeguard the core services we now provide. |

## Resources

The SfEP's 'Brush up your grammar' course is available in both classroom-based and online versions. It aims to clarify the rules and to explain the reasons for using them, especially when justification is needed: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/courses.asp#oc4

The SfEP review of books includes all the reviews that have appeared in the SfEP magazine *Editing Matters* since January 2007– and many more: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/reviews.asp

In the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts (OUP, 2020), you can read more about:
• using good grammar in Chapter 11
• using good punctuation in Chapter 10
• writing short sentences in Chapter 3
• using vertical lists in Chapter 8
• using strong verbs in Chapter 7
• using active verbs in Chapter 6
• achieving a positive tone in Chapter 9.

SfEP Guides are practical booklets targeted at editors, proofreaders and project managers, including those working for companies and government agencies and departments. *Your House Style: Styling your words for maximum impact*, by Christina Thomas, describes how to construct a style guide: sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/br/business/sfep_guides.asp#YHS

## Special needs

*Dementia*
The Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (2013) *Writing dementia-friendly information*: dementiavoices.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/DEEP-Guide-Writing-dementia-friendly-information.pdf

*Low literacy*

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (which merged with the Basic Skills Agency in 2007) has produced a guide entitled *Readability: How to produce clear written materials for a range of readers* (2009). It is available free of charge online at shop.niace.org.uk/media/catalog/product/R/e/Readability.pdf

Cecilia Conrath Doak, Leonard Doak and Jane Root (1996) *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills*, JB Lippincott Company

# 7. Layout and design

Even when you have clearly worded text, readers will not be able to take in your message if the way it is laid out makes it difficult to read. Research on legibility has led to a number of agreed guidelines on how best to present text intended for audiences that include older people.

## Developing a template

Just as a style guide is a useful way to reinforce the language element of plain language, an organization can help staff follow the guidelines on layout by creating a word-processing template that automatically does many of the things suggested below. If you plan to have your text professionally designed, pick a designer who is interested in and knowledgeable about inclusive design.

## Font

### Style

Use a simple, clear font. Fonts can be 'serif' or 'sans serif'. A serif is the small stroke that some fonts have at the end of most letters; Times New Roman is a serif font, and Arial a sans serif font.
This text is in Times New Roman (12 point)
And this text is in Arial (also 12 point)

In paper-based text, many designers advise using serif fonts for the body text (based on the argument that they can help guide the reader's eye), and sans serif for headings (to help them stand out from the body text) and for tables (as these tend to be read vertically rather than horizontally). But sans serif is often preferred for web text as well as for short publications.

There is a huge amount of research on choice of font, which usability consultant Jakob Nielsen summarizes as follows:

> Legibility research is inconclusive as to whether serif fonts are truly better than sans serif. Almost all mainstream printed newspapers, magazines, and books use serif type, and thus people are more accustomed to reading long texts in this style. However, given the research data, the difference in reading speed between serif and sans serif is apparently quite small. Thus, there's **no strong usability guideline in favor of using one or the other**, so you can make the choice based on other considerations – such as branding or the mood communicated by a particular typographical style.[46]

### Case

Do not use 'all caps' – this makes text hard to read. Sentence case is generally considered easier to read than title case.

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[46] Jakob Nielsen (2012) *Serif vs. Sans-Serif Fonts for HD Screens*: http://www.nngroup.com/articles/serif-vs-sans-serif-fonts-hd-screens/

***Size***

Most standard print is 10 to 12 point, but using 12 to 14 point will make your text legible for more people without being so large that it risks annoying or distracting a general readership. Remember that fonts of the same point size vary a lot in physical size due to the different styles of the letters. For example, 12-point Times New Roman looks smaller than 12-point Arial.

This is 12 point Times New Roman
This is 12 point Arial

Resist the temptation to reduce your font size because you cannot fit all your text into the available space. Get rid of some words instead – or accept that you need more pages.

Use bigger font sizes for headings, with different sizes to indicate the hierarchy of headings. Make sure you are consistent with these, to help show the reader the structure of the text. For example, this guide uses size 14 for section headings, and 12 for sub-headings.

Online (as opposed to paper-based) text has the big advantage here that you can make it scalable, so users can easily increase the size to suit their needs.

***Direction***

Having a title or heading that runs vertically or obliquely rather than horizontally makes readers tilt their heads or move the page in order to read it; it is likely that they will not bother and so your message will not get through.

***Creating emphasis***

Where you can, create emphasis in body text through language and structure, rather than making words bold, italic or underlined. If you do need to do this, and for headings, use bold or italic rather than underlining or capitals, but be sparing. Bold stands out better than italic, but both are hard to read in any quantity and can be distracting. Underlined text is particularly difficult to read, and people often think it looks unattractive.

## Justification and line length

For ease of reading, use left-aligned (rather than fully justified, centred or right-aligned) text. Full justification adds uneven spaces between words, making them harder to read.

Keep your lines of text to a reasonable length – very short or long lines are more difficult to read. When using A4 paper and font size 12 to 14, one column is fine.

Avoid splitting words between lines (with hyphens) or wrapping text around graphics.

## White space

Use white space to help show the logical structure of the text, separating unrelated parts of the text and grouping related ones. For example, leave more space above a heading than below it, so as to separate it from the text above and link it with that below.

Older readers may find that lines that are close can blur together. Using generous line spacing (or even double-spacing text) can help prevent this problem.

These days, it is usual to have just one space (rather than two) after a full stop.

To get an idea of how effectively you have used white space, change the view of your word-processing screen (to about 35%) so that you can see a whole page at once. If you are looking at a paper copy of your work, do so from a distance.

## Paper and colour

If your text is printed, use matt paper that is thick enough for the writing not to show through to the other side. Glossy paper produces glare, which is especially hard on older eyes.

For maximum contrast and reading ease, use black ink for the text on a white background. If you do use any other colours, make sure you have a good reason to do so, and ensure a strong contrast between the colour of the text and that of the background. Avoid patterned or shaded backgrounds (including text printed over photographs), and 'reversed out' text (e.g. white text on a black background).

## Images

A single image (rather than collage of images) is easier to view and understand. The image should be clear – in terms of both sharpness and how easy it is to recognize the content. Make sure pictures relate to and support the text, rather than being purely decorative (which can be distracting).

Text aimed at a general audience should include people of all types, including different ages. Ensure that the image does not stereotype older people: remember that older people have varying levels of physical and mental ability, and come from different socioeconomic and ethnic groups.

## Special purposes and needs

The guidelines outlined above will work well for most types of text. However, some text has a more specialist purpose, such as instructing and signposting. The same facts still apply (e.g. that the writing on a sign should be big enough for people to read easily), but of course the font size required to achieve this will often be much larger than 12 to 14 point). The resources listed at the end of Chapter 3 provide more information on producing instructions, forms and signage.

There are also some types of readers who need even inclusive design to be adapted. For example, although using font size 12 to 14 makes text legible to most people, those with sight loss may well struggle to read it. Hartley (1994) points out that while 20% of those registered blind cannot see at all (or can perceive only light) and so need Braille transcriptions or audio recording of text, many of the remaining 80% can read large print. The RNIB defines this as 16 point or more (with text of font size 18 point or more being known as 'giant' print); it advises:[47]

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[47] https://help.rnib.org.uk/help/daily-living/reading/large-print-size

If you're thinking of producing material in large print for someone, check with them first to see what size of font they are comfortable reading. Some people may even prefer audio for very long documents or books. You might also want to consider using a font that is more legible, perhaps even a specialist font such as Tiresias.

**Resources**

**General**

You can read more about the basics of clear layout in Chapter 30 of the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts (OUP, 2020).

The Design for All website is provided by the European Design for All e-Accessibility Network. It includes resources and tools to help with inclusive design: www.education.edean.org/index.php?filters=f1

**Signage**

Martin Cutts has written various articles on parking signs; these cover aspects of sign design: https://www.clearest.co.uk/articles#Parkingunclearandmisleadingsignsanddocuments. In this work, he draws on the Traffic Signs Manual (Department for Transport, 2013), Chapter 7 of which includes information on sign design: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/203668/traffic-signs-manual-chapter-07.pdf

**Special needs**

*Sight loss*
The RNIB's Knowledge and Research Hub offers information on sight loss: www.rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub

# 8. Writing for the web

More and more older people are now using the internet, and it is common to see references to 'silver surfers' – despite 'silver' being a word to avoid (see Chapter 5), a Google search gives over a million results! Whereas 65% of people aged 65-plus in 2006 had never used the internet, this figure had dropped to 25% by 2014.[48] Although older people are increasingly adept at using the web, they may be relatively unfamiliar with computer conventions that younger people use without thinking (e.g. clicking, scrolling and using menus). Jakob Nielsen (2013a) writes: 'Users aged 65 and older are 43% slower at using websites than users aged 21–55. This is an improvement over previous studies, but designs must change to better accommodate aging users.'

As with writing for special purposes and for people with special needs, following the guidelines given in Chapters 4 to 7 will go a long way towards making web text easy to read. But there are some key differences between paper-based text and online text that affect how they are read. These give rise to some extra factors to consider.

## Purpose, content and structure

You cannot flick through an electronic text as easily as a paper-based one, and can only ever see part of it at any time. So it is harder to get an overall idea of its structure, and to work out where you are in relation to the text as a whole. This makes organizing the content particularly important.

- Make it clear how the information on the website is organized; a broad, shallow structure is easier to use than a narrow, deep one.
- Split information into short sections, grouping related topics and using headings that clearly state the content of the text that follows.
- Summarize and repeat important information.
- Make any instructions clear, numbering each step.
- Make it easy to go back to previously viewed pages, and then forward again; it helps to use the same set of navigation buttons in the same place on each page.
- Use single mouse clicks to access information.
- Use the same style of links throughout, so users can easily tell what is 'clickable' and which links they have already visited (e.g. by making the latter change colour); do not underline anything that is not a link.
- Make menus easy to use, so users do not have to slide the mouse/click at the same time.
- Include a search box, in the same place on every page of the site (ideally the upper left or upper right side).
- Be 'tolerant' of the words people put in the search box, to allow for misspellings.
- Provide a site map, with a link from every page.
- Tell users how they can contact the site owners (including a phone number and email address) if they cannot find what they need on the site.

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[48] Office for National Statistics (2014) 'Internet Access – Households and Individuals': http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-322080

## Style and grammar

Jakob Nielsen has done a lot of work on how users read on the web, which he summarizes as follows (1997): 'They don't. People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.'

The standard plain-language guidelines are very much in keeping with specific guidelines on writing for the web. But if anything, you can go even further in reducing the word count: bullet lists are definitely better here than a paragraph of full sentences. Highlighting key words can also help readers to scan the text.

Be especially vigilant for jargon that older readers may find unfamiliar. Jakob Nielsen advises (2013b): 'If using web or browser-related terms, consider defining them in place to make websites easier for senior citizens. Avoid using technical words if they are not necessary.'

'*I teach tablet and laptop skills to seniors and I have to break down what Apple, Microsoft and Google think are simple steps into even tinier steps. For example, "drag to trash" is meaningless – we have to begin: "Look for the thing that looks like a dustbin." To me, it seems patronizing, but they seem to appreciate it.*' Ali Turnbull

## Layout and design

Online page size is smaller, as a normal-sized screen holds less than an A4 page. Page orientation is also different, a screen being landscape-shaped (wider than it is long) and a page usually portrait-shaped (longer than it is wide). You therefore need to think about the shape and size of any graphics, to make sure readers can see the whole thing at once.

- Allow extra space around clickable links and buttons, so that the user can easily target each one without clicking another by mistake.
- Make it easy for users to change the text size and the contrast.
- Whereas serif fonts are often recommended for the body text of paper-based text, sans serif fonts may be better for web text (see Chapter 7).
- Italic is even harder to read online than on paper.
- Use colours to group information visually, without forgetting the importance of ensuring good contrast between background and text (see Chapter 7).
- Avoid using pop-ups and images that may distract attention and are not relevant to the task.
- Let the user be in control – avoid automatically scrolling text or images (which are hard to follow and distracting).
- Minimize the need for vertical scrolling (e.g. by keeping page length short and putting the most important text in the central, top area), and eliminate horizontal scrolling.

## Including text alternatives

Because different people experience different problems in ageing, it makes sense to provide information in a choice of formats. For example, people with vision problems may find an audio format easier to understand, and those who have trouble reading may prefer video. The US National Institute on Aging (2007) reports that research suggests older adults who receive the same information in more than one mode retain more of it.

- Use short segments of audio and video to reduce the download time on older computers and slower connections.
- Provide transcripts of audio and video.
- Add alternative-text tags to images, with meaningful descriptions, so that people with sight loss who are using a screen reader (or others who cannot view the images, for whatever reason) know what the images show.

# Bringing it all together

Age UK worked with Wiltshire Farm Foods (a company that delivers ready-cooked frozen meals to older people) to help make its website more user-friendly. Using market research, the company identified that its core market is the over-75s, with its typical customer being female and aged around 83. Working with users and usability experts, it applied inclusive-design principles in two main areas:

- consistency, clarity and simplicity – colour coding the main menu and using clear, clean colour schemes to increase the consistency of the website (so allowing users to focus their attention on purchasing meals rather than familiarising themselves with different webpages)
- descriptive language – avoiding computer jargon and using the first person to help users understand the action brought about by clicking on a hyperlink (so reducing the number of people dropping out of transactions).

These changes increased online sales, suggesting that inclusive-design techniques with the older person in mind can have a tangible return on investment for businesses.

**Resources**

The SfEP runs a course 'Introduction to Web Editorial Skills'. This shows how the web differs from print and how these differences affect the way web content is edited. See www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/courses.asp#ce8

Jakob Nielsen (1997) *How Users Read on the Web*: www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/

Jakob Nielsen (2013a) *Seniors as Web Users*:[49] www.nngroup.com/articles/usability-for-senior-citizens/

Jakob Nielsen (2013b): *Define Techy Terms for Older Users*:[49] www.nngroup.com/articles/define-techy-words-old-users/

National Institute on Aging (2007) *Making Your Website Senior Friendly*: www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/making-your-website-senior-friendly

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[49] Thanks to SfEP member Nancy Duin for bringing this to my attention

Dana Chisnell and Janice (Ginny) Redish (2004) *Audience-Centered Heuristics: Older Adults,* American Association of Retired Persons (AARP): [redish.net/images/stories/PDF/AARP%20Audience-Centered%20Heuristics.pdf](redish.net/images/stories/PDF/AARP%20Audience-Centered%20Heuristics.pdf)

Janice (Ginny) Redish (2012) *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, Morgan Kaufmann

# 9. Checking the suitability of your text

One of the core principles of plain language, as mentioned at several points in this guide, is testing the text on the target audience. This commonly seeks to measure the audience's:

- understanding of the text
- speed of reading the text
- liking for the text.

The ways of doing this vary in how thorough and fast they are, and how much they cost:

- using grammar-checkers – least thorough but fast and free (if you use Word)
- getting colleagues, friends or family to comment – more thorough, takes more time, also free
- testing on the real audience – most thorough, but may be impractical in terms of the time required, and may be costly
- using an editor – a good alternative to testing on the real audience, often with a fast turnaround and at reasonable cost.

Which method (or combination of methods) you choose depends on the importance of your text (taking into account the number of people who will read it), the time available, and your budget. Remember that, for an important text that will be read by many people, testing may pay for itself many times over – in fewer queries and misunderstandings, and better engagement with your audience.

## Using spelling and grammar-checkers

After spell-checking your text, the grammar-checker in Microsoft Word shows a panel headed 'Readability Statistics' (so long as you have ticked 'Show readability statistics' under File – Options – Proofing). This includes some useful information:

- Words per sentence – this shows the average sentence length. As you saw in Chapter 6, this should be between 15 and 20 words.
- Proportion of 'passives' – if this is over half, look at your verbs carefully. Ask yourself whether you really need so many passives.
- Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level – many US government departments use this readability formula to test their texts. You can convert the American grade level (which actually fits with the current way of labelling school years in the UK schools, e.g. fifth grade = year five) to the reading age by adding 5.
- Flesch Reading Ease – this formula scores your writing from 0 (very hard to read) to 100 (very easy). The table below shows the equivalent grade-level score and reading age.

| Flesch Reading Ease score | Equivalent grade-level score (reading age) | Description of text with this score |
|---|---|---|
| 90–100 | 5th grade (reading age 10) | Very easy |
| 80–89 | 6th grade (reading age 11) | Easy |
| 70–79 | 7th grade (reading age 12) | Fairly easy |
| 60–69 | 8–9th grade (reading age 13–14) | Manageable |
| 50–59 | 10–12th grade (reading age 15–17) | Fairly hard |
| 30–49 | 13–16th grade (reading age 18–21) | Hard |
| 0–29 | College graduate | Very hard |

Readability formulas usually combine the number of long words and average sentence length to predict how hard the text will be to read. They ignore other important elements of clear language, as well as tone, content, structure and design. They are therefore quite a crude tool, but can give a useful indication of how easy the text is to read. They can be valuable for comparing two versions of a text, giving an idea of which is more readable. The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level for the original and rewritten examples in Chapter 6 are shown below.

| Example | Flesch Reading Ease | | Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level (reading age) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Before | After | Before | After |
| 1 | 48.0 | 72.9 | 15.2 (17.2) | 8.5 (13.5) |
| 2 | 29.5 | 65.7 | 20.0 (25.0) | 7.5 (12.5) |
| 3 | 34.5 | 63.7 | 13.9 (18.9) | 7.8 (12.8) |
| 4 | 3.4 | 57.9 | 24.9 (29.9) | 8.7 (13.7) |
| 5 | 15.4 | 49.4 | 20.7 (25.7) | 7.6 (12.6) |
| 6 | 42.5 | 44.4 | 12.5 (17.5) | 9.5 (14.5)* |
| 7 | 51.0 | 72.7 | 11.8 (16.8) | 8.3 (13.3) |
| 8 | 43.9 | 64.9 | 10.3 (15.3) | 6.9 (11.9) |

When writing for the general public, you should aim for a maximum reading age of 14 (American grade level of nine, or UK year nine). The 'After' versions of all our example sentences meet this standard except Example 6, for which the score has improved but remains a little high. As Word calculates the average sentence length to be ten words (due to the way the software treats bullet lists) – which is short – it must be the longer words in the example that raise the readability score. It is hard to see how to reduce the word length further, and the longer words that remain are examples, as mentioned in Chapter 5, of ones that are probably still familiar to most people (e.g. *developing* and *strategies*); this illustrates the shortcomings of readability formulas.

Compared to grammar-checkers that are integral to word-processing software, StyleWriter: the Plain English Editor is a more sophisticated tool, specifically tailored to plain English. There is a free 14-day trial.

## Getting others to comment

People will take into account a wider range of aspects than a readability formula ever could. But if you do ask others (e.g. colleagues, friends or family members) to comment, consider how similar they are to your readers. For example, are they alike in their reading ability, knowledge of any technical terms, interest in the subject matter, and cultural background? Bear in mind, too, your relationship with the person you ask for comments. Will your friend feel able to tell you that what you have written is unclear? Or might your manager make unnecessary changes to assert authority?

'*I have to bear in mind that my immediate circle does tend to be among the "higher qualification" bracket (which will apply to most editors, too).*' Katherine James

A study compared the changes suggested by text-editing software and comments made by colleagues. This showed that text-editing programs were more thorough and systematic

than colleagues, but colleagues offered comments on a broader range of aspects of a text's plainness.[50]

## Testing on the real audience

The most thorough way of testing a standard letter or email is to try it out on members of the real audience. Usability testing is a specialist area, but research has shown that people who are not specifically trained in research methods can test a text effectively using basic methods.[51] Here are some tips:

- Use any existing groups, or consider forming a focus group (or even appointing a longer-term advisory group), of typical readers.
- Use interviews, focus groups or questionnaires to find out how easy the text is to understand and how fast to read, and how much they like it.
- Be specific about what you ask people to do, and how much influence they really have. Otherwise, if your message is an unpopular one, people may discuss this rather than the clarity of the text.
- Dissuade people from being pernickety about small points of style that do not affect how easily they understand the text.
- Make sure people know you are testing the text, not them.
- Tell them your organization is responsible for how easy or hard it is to understand.
- Ask people to point out what difficulties they think others may have in understanding the text. They may feel less inhibited to talk about others than about themselves.
- Give people a chance to tell you any problems privately, for example by writing them down.

## Using plain-English editors

Experts can assess how clear your text is, and improve it. Although they would not claim to be a substitute for testing on the real audience, such editors are expert in how readable a text is likely to be for the target readers. Most are able to turn round work quickly, and at a reasonable price.

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[50] James Hartley (1984) 'The role of colleagues and text editing programs in improving text', *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, PC-27, 1
[51] Janice Redish, Daniel Felker and Andrew Rose (1981) 'Evaluating the effects of document design principles', *Information Design Journal* 2 (3/4)

**Resources**

StyleWriter is available from Editor Software at www.editorsoftware.com, where you can view demonstrations and download a free 14-day trial.

For more on the pros and cons of readability tests and adult literacy in the UK, see 'Writing by numbers: are readability tests to clarity what karaoke is to song?' by Martin Cutts (2008): https://www.clearest.co.uk/articles#Readabilitytesting
For a guide to usability testing, see *Handbook of Usability Testing: How to plan, design, and conduct effective tests* by Jeffrey Rubin and Dana Chisnell (Wiley, Chichester, 2008).

Dana Chisnell, Amy Lee, and Janice Redish (2004) 'Recruiting and Working with Older Participants in Usability Studies', AARP:
redish.net/images/stories/PDF/recruiting_and_working_with_older_participants.pdf
This article is based on recruiting and working with 34 older adults in the USA for exploratory studies of a website.

# 10.   Acquiring or commissioning the skills

## Acquiring the skills

*Ensuring Editorial Excellence*, the SfEP's code of practice, divides editing into three levels: Level 1 (technical, e.g. checking grammar and spelling), Level 2 (structural, e.g. also rephrasing and reorganizing) and Level 3 (substantive, e.g. rewriting). It is rare for plain-language editing to be anything other than substantive: 'The client will have agreed with the author (who is primarily an information provider and not necessarily an experienced writer) that reconstruction and rewriting are necessary in order to adapt the material for its defined market, as well as Level 1 copy-editing and mark-up.'

To be a competent plain-language editor, you must first be a competent editor. For people new to the field, the SfEP can advise on how best to gain editorial skills and offers its own range of one-day courses. These cater for the whole range of experience, from beginners to established editors.

For those who already have editorial skills, there is as yet no standard way of gaining skills in plain language in most countries, though work is ongoing to develop a postgraduate course in clear communication. The International Consortium for Clear Communication (IC Clear) is a partnership of higher-education institutions from various countries. Funded by the European Commission's Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme, IC Clear's project aims to produce a course covering plain language, information design and usability techniques. It is backed by Plain Language Association InterNational and the International Institute for Information Design.

However, Plain English Campaign and Plain Language Commission provide various short courses that will teach you the style and basic techniques required for plain-English editing. These courses can be:
- in-house – group courses for people from one organization, usually held on the organization's premises
- open – group courses for individuals, usually held in a public location
- distance-learning.

Another useful resource – free of charge but written for Canadian rather than British English – is Plain Train, an online tutorial in eight sections.

## Commissioning the skills

'*In a world filled to the brim with words that aren't performing well – have you read a cosmetics print ad lately? – editors can make a meaningful difference by helping people to move through their world with more clarity.*
'*If you know what you're trying to say, and the message is both credible and decent, good editors will help you say it. You could say that's why we're here.*'
Robin Black

For organizations wishing to ensure their written communications are in plain English, it may be easier, faster and more cost-effective to commission a professional editor.

In 2009, the SfEP celebrated its 21st birthday by publishing two sets of 21 top tips from its membership – one from the point of view of freelance editors and proofreaders, and one

from the perspective of project managers and managing editors. Suggested by freelance and in-house members, the tips highlight what is important to produce a readable publication without breaking the bank. Choose the set that is most appropriate to your role or read both to get a better understanding of everyone's roles in editorial projects.

The SfEP also runs a one-day course, entitled *Getting work with non-publishers*. This shows that editors are keen to promote their work to organizations outside the publishing sector.

As noted in Chapter 1, more than 500 qualified and experienced editors are listed in the SfEP Directory of Editorial Services, together with details of the skills, subjects and services they offer. Using the search box, you can pinpoint quickly and easily experienced freelances with the attributes you require.

'*Most sentences are simple in structure, like this one. Occasionally, a sentence can cause problems if its sense is ambiguous, and this is down to the way in which the words are ordered, or syntax. Consider the following sentence: "This led researchers to conclude that some music not only aids relaxation, but euphoria, as in the case of some individuals, who report alleviated symptoms, could play an important role in their general well-being."*

'*The not-only-but-also construction in written (and spoken) English is often misused, and here there is a distinct lack of clarity in the syntax and, hence, meaning. The sentence could be written in several different ways, each with a very different meaning (changes from the original marked in bold):*

- *This led researchers to conclude that some music **aids not only** relaxation but **also** euphoria, **since**, in the case of some individuals who report alleviated symptoms, **music** could play an important role in their general well-being.*
- *This led researchers to conclude that **not only does** some music **aid** relaxation, but **also**, as in the case of some individuals who report alleviated symptoms, **euphoria** could play an important role in their general well-being.*
- *This led researchers to conclude that some music not only aids relaxation **and** euphoria, as in the case of some individuals who report alleviated symptoms, **but also** could play an important role in their general well-being.*
- *This led researchers to conclude that some music not only aids relaxation but **also induces** euphoria, as in the case of some individuals who report **that** alleviated **symptoms could** play an important role in their general well-being.*

'*Only the author knows which one of the above variants is intended for publication! An experienced editor would carefully analyse the sentence; try to determine what the author probably means to convey; provide a suggested edited version of the sentence (e.g. variant 4: perhaps most likely) to show how the reworded sentence differs from the original and how different meanings can result from subtle differences in sentence structure; and finally ask the author to check, clarify, and state exactly how the sentence is to be reworded.*' Paul Sensecall

# Resources

*Ensuring Editorial Excellence*, the SfEP code of practice, is available at www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/sfepcop.asp.

The SfEP Guide *Editing into Plain Language*, by Sarah Carr, looks at key aspects of working in plain-language editing for corporate clients.

**Training**
- SfEP courses: www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/training.asp
- IC Clear's planned postgraduate course: icclear.net/
- PEC courses: www.plainenglish.co.uk/training.html
- PLC courses: https://www.clearest.co.uk/onsite-courses
- Plain Train (by Cheryl Stephens, Janet Dean and Joe Soroka): www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/

**SfEP top tips**
- *21 top tips to make the most of your freelance copy-editor or proofreader*: www.sfep.org.uk/pub/faqs/toptips/21tips_freelances.asp
- *21 top tips to make the most of your project manager or managing editor*: www.sfep.org.uk/pub/faqs/toptips/21tips_managers.asp

SfEP Directory: www.sfep.org.uk/directory/directory.asp

# Resources

## Books

- Adler, M & Perry, D (2017) *Clarity for Lawyers: Effective legal language*, The Law Society, London
- Carr, S (2002) *Tackling NHS Jargon: Getting the message across*, Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford
- Cutts, M (2020) *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, OUP, Oxford
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- Gowers, E & Gowers, R (2014) *Plain Words*, Penguin, London
- Hartley, J (1994) *Designing Instructional Text*, Kogan Page, London
- Jarrett, C & Gaffney, G (2008) *Forms that Work: Designing web forms for usability*, Morgan Kaufmann, Burlington MA
- Maggio, R (1997) *Talking About People: A guide to fair and accurate language*, Oryx Press, Phoenix AZ
- Redish, J (2012) *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, Morgan Kaufmann, Waltham MA
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- Turnbull, A (2001) *Plain Words for Nurses: Writing and communicating effectively*, Foundation of Nursing Studies, London: www.fons.org/resources/documents/PlainWordsForNurses.pdf

## Reports, short guides and articles

- Age UK (2010) *Golden Economy: The Consumer Marketplace in an Ageing Society* (research by ILC-UK): http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/images/uploads/publication-pdfs/pdf_pdf_155.pdf
- Canadian Public Health Association (1998), *Creating Plain Language Forms for Seniors:* A guide for the public, private and not-for-profit sectors: www.cpha.ca/uploads/portals/h-l/pl_forms_seniors_e.pdf
- Carr, S (2006) 'Technical jargon: an approach, an idea and an offering', *Clarity* 55, May: clarity-international.net/journals/55.pdf
- Carr, S (2011, reprinted with updates 2014) *Editing into Plain Language*, SfEP, London
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (2010) *Toolkit for Making Written Material Clear and Effective – Part 9: Material for Older Adults*: www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/ToolkitPart09.html
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- Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project (2013) *Writing dementia-friendly information*: http://dementiavoices.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/DEEP-Guide-Writing-dementia-friendly-information.pdf

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  https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/traffic-signs-manual
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  www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf
- Plain Language Commission (2011) *Plain English Lexicon*:
  https://www.clearest.co.uk/plain-english-lexicon
- SfEP (2011) *Ensuring Editorial Excellence*, the SfEP code of practice:
  www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/sfepcop.asp.
- Thomas, C, *Your House Style: Styling your words for maximum impact* (SfEP Guide):
  http://sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/br/business/sfep_guides.asp#YHS

## Courses
- IC Clear's planned postgraduate course: http://icclear.net/
- PEC courses: www.plainenglish.co.uk/training.html
- Plain Train (by Cheryl Stephens, Janet Dean and Joe Sorokin):
  www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/
- PLC courses: https://www.clearest.co.uk/onsite-courses
- SfEP courses: www.sfep.org.uk/pub/train/training.asp

## Web pages
- BNC: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/
- Brunel Institute for Ageing Studies: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/bbs/research/research-impact/improving-the-lives-of-ageing-consumers
- Design for All: http://www.education.edean.org/index.php?filters=f1
- RNIB's Knowledge and Research Hub: http://www.rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub

- SfEP: http://www.sfep.org.uk/
- SfEP Directory of Editorial Services: http://www.sfep.org.uk/directory/directory.asp
- SfEP review of books: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/reviews.asp
- SfEP suggested minimum freelance rates: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/mship/minimum_rates.asp
- SfEP training: http://sfep.org.uk/pub/train/training.asp
- 'Why edit?': http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/gen/whyeditexamples/plainenglish/home.asp.
- *21 top tips to make the most of your freelance copy-editor or proofreader*: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/faqs/toptips/21tips_freelances.asp
- *21 top tips to make the most of your project manager or managing editor*: http://www.sfep.org.uk/pub/faqs/toptips/21tips_managers.asp

## Computer software
- StyleWriter: the Plain English Editor: www.editorsoftware.com

## Abbreviations

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|---|---|---|---|
| AARP | American Association of Retired Persons | SCIE | Social Care Institute for Excellence |
| BNC | British National Corpus | SfEP | Society for Editors and Proofreaders |
| ICAA | International Council on Active Aging | UK | United Kingdom |
| IC Clear | International Consortium for Clear Communication | USA | United States of America |
| ILC-UK | International Longevity Centre UK | WHO | World Health Organization |
| IMRAD | Introduction, method, results and discussion | | |
| IPC | International Publishing Corporation | | |
| NHS | National Health Service | | |
| NRDC | National Research and Development Centre | | |
| NUJ | National Union of Journalists | | |
| OAP | Old-age pensioner | | |
| OED | Oxford English Dictionary | | |
| OUP | Oxford University Press | | |
| PEC | Plain English Campaign Limited | | |
| PLC | Plain Language Commission | | |
| RAF | Royal Air Force | | |
| RNIB | Royal National Institute of Blind People | | |