

Why use plain language?

Whether you're writing to customers, colleagues or members of the public, it makes sense to use language they'll easily be able to understand. We call this 'plain language' or 'clear language'.

Plain language improves efficiency and saves money because more people will read and act upon the documents you send them. They won't need to ask you to explain. They won't go ahead and do the wrong thing because they've misunderstood.

Plain language can be fairer language because it informs and empowers people. We think people have a right to be able to understand the documents, instructions, websites and product labels that affect them. Plain language is required by many leading organizations, by several regulators and even by some laws.

For example, the Consumer Rights Act 2015 requires written terms of consumer contracts to be 'transparent'. The main aspect of transparency is that the term should be plain and intelligible to the average person, whom the Act defines as:

'a consumer who is reasonably well informed, observant and circumspect'.

Since 2003 the Law Society of England and Wales has explicitly required solicitors to communicate clearly with customers. It's part of a service standard:

- 'We will communicate with you in plain language.' (Law Society website, 24 February 2017)

Industry-leading firms use clear writing as an important part of their brand image. Pret A Manger, the café chain, puts this clear promise on its carrier bags:

- 'Every Pret has its own kitchen. We don't have a factory. We make our sandwiches, baguettes and PretWraps one by one, right here, throughout the day. You won't find sell-by dates and storage information on our sandwiches and wraps. If our fresh food doesn't sell out each day we give it away to charity rather than compromise our standards.'

The head of department of a leading international law firm – which prides itself on the clarity of its advice – tells his staff:

- 'We are paid for the words on the paper and we should never forget that. We have spent a lot of money on our brand, and a key part of our brand is the clarity of our documents.'

Strong businesses aren't afraid of clarity and they think it pays to use plain language. We can help you do it through our editing services and writing-skills courses.