

Writing Plain English

Be clear,
be brief,
be human



Free self-study guide to the basics of good business writing
by Martin Cutts, author of *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*

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LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

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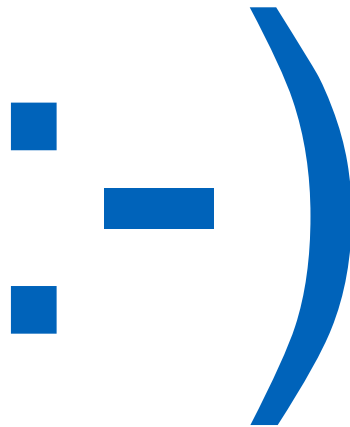
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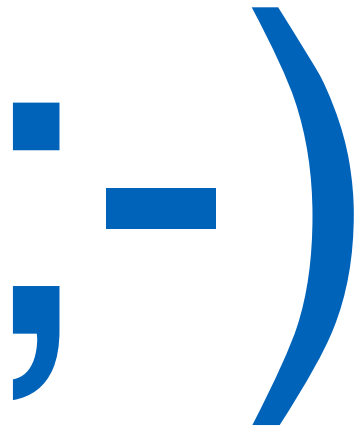
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1 Starting points

One of your most important work skills is to write well. To do this, you need to say what you want to say to colleagues and customers in a clear style, using good grammar and sound punctuation.

Writing well is a highly marketable skill and, some would say, a surprisingly unusual one. So if you can put clear thinking on the page in the form of clear writing, this will be good for your career. It will get you noticed for all the right reasons.

The terms 'plain English' and 'plain language' are used interchangeably in this course and in many English-speaking countries. The International Plain Language Federation says:

'A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.'



This course gives you a quick guide to some of the main points about writing well in plain English. It's mainly about writing for business, not for journalistic or artistic purposes.

You'll be able to complete the course in about two hours, but you can go at your own speed and return to it whenever you want. Just scroll through the pages and, if you wish, test your writing reflexes by responding to the examples I give.

I have used British English, including British punctuation and spelling. Most of the examples I give are from UK sources but a few are from India, Australia and the US. I hope all users of English, wherever they live, will find the course useful.

To help you take your study further, I've listed some books at the end. I recommend my *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (edition 5) because it expands on all the points in this course; covers different topics such as report-writing and summary-writing; is available to borrow from public libraries; and is on sale as a low-cost paperback.



2 Some easy examples

We can all recognize good writing when we see it. Take this paragraph from a possible response to a letter of complaint about the cancellation of a hospital appointment:



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We can all recognize good writing when we see it. Take this paragraph from a possible response to a letter of complaint about the cancellation of a hospital appointment:



I regret we had to cancel your appointment on 26 January because there were no suitable clinics that day. However, the senior optometrist reviewed your case and decided that a delay would be medically safe.



2 Some easy examples

We can all recognize good writing when we see it. Take this paragraph from a possible response to a letter of complaint about the cancellation of a hospital appointment:



I regret we had to cancel your appointment on 26 January because there were no suitable clinics that day. However, the senior optometrist reviewed your case and decided that a delay would be medically safe.

Looks easy, doesn't it? It has short sentences, everyday words (apart from the doctor's job role) and simple punctuation. It's pleasant, friendly and reasonable. It has a point of view and makes it simply and effectively.

If only that's what the real author had written!



In fact, he wrote this (and it was signed off under the name of the hospital's chief executive, which makes it even worse):



In fact, he wrote this (and it was signed off under the name of the hospital's chief executive, which makes it even worse):



Unfortunately your appointment for 26 January had to be cancelled because there were no clinics running that day. It is normal practice for access to all clinics for this day being denied, however this was not possible on this occasion due to the outreach clinics still running. I again would like to reiterate that all cancelled appointment are reviewed by the consultant or a senior member of their team or in your case by the senior optometrist, to ensure it is medical safe to delay the patient.



In fact, he wrote this (and it was signed off under the name of the hospital's chief executive, which makes it even worse):



Unfortunately your appointment for 26 January had to be cancelled because there were no clinics running that day. It is normal practice for access to all clinics for this day being denied, however this was not possible on this occasion due to the outreach clinics still running. I again would like to reiterate that all cancelled appointment are reviewed by the consultant or a senior member of their team or in your case by the senior optometrist, to ensure it is medical safe to delay the patient.

What a mess! The punctuation is poor. Phrases like 'medical safe' and 'cancelled appointment are reviewed' are poor English. There's defensive jargon about 'access being denied' and unexplained talk of 'outreach clinics'. It's all a muddle that may generate another complaint. It may even damage the patient's opinion of the hospital's competence on other matters, such as surgery.



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What do you notice about this overlong (48-word) sentence? Yes, both the commas are wrong – they should be full stops because a sentence ends at each of those points. Getting the punctuation right is an important aspect of good writing.

And what about 'variance'? Sounds official and scientific, doesn't it? The dictionary gives variance several meanings but none of them is 'variation' or 'difference', which is what the author intends to say here.



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May I begin by congratulating you on the extemporaneous way you have followed company procedures in how to fob off a valued customer who you have repeatedly let down.



You can see the same problem in this sentence, where the author is trying to be sarcastic (rarely a good idea in writing):



May I begin by congratulating you on the extemporary way you have followed company procedures in how to fob off a valued customer who you have repeatedly let down.

Unfortunately the sarcasm falls flat because ‘extemporary’ means ‘spoken or done without preparation’ (the same as the equally rare word ‘extemporaneous’). The author probably meant excellent or exemplary. It’s a good writing principle not to use a word if you don’t know what it means – and online and printed dictionaries are there to help if you’re not sure.



Things can be even worse in legal documents. Here's a clause from a life insurance policy meant to be read by individual policyholders:



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Notwithstanding anything hereinbefore contained no partial surrender may be effected unless both the sum payable on the partial surrender and the total after the surrender of the Participating Sum Assured and the Related Bonuses thereon and of all Further Participating Sums Assured and Related Bonuses thereon exceed a minimum sum which the Society shall determine at the time of the partial surrender.



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The author may be a wizard with legal concepts but this is hard work for typical policyholders, and even for lawyers and judges. Nowadays, Jo Public expects to be able to have a good chance of understanding legal documents that set out the consumer's rights and benefits.



Whether you're writing on paper, in an email, or on a website, you have a duty to be as clear as possible. If you do this, your readers won't have to work too hard for the information. Remember: they are busy people, with plenty of other things to do. So let them focus on your messages instead of getting bogged down in unusual words and long sentences. Help them do that and they'll respect you, even though they may not always agree with you.



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- Take care to keep sentences short and get the punctuation right.
- Don't use unusual words unless you know what they mean.
- Consider the needs of your audience.



3 Using everyday words

The breadth and richness of English enables us all to develop a wide vocabulary of both common and unusual words to express ourselves effectively in many kinds of writing, from emails and texts to letters and reports.

In most trades and professions, unusual words can be great time-savers. So lawyers, architects, medical doctors and engineers will often prefer to use jargon and shorthand terms to communicate quickly with others in their field. 'TIA' is a time-saving medical acronym for transient ischaemic attack, for example.

This kind of useful jargon is also widespread in roofing, bricklaying, plumbing and carpentry.



Sometimes, though, authors use jargon and high-level language when simpler words would be better understood by most of the readers. So, in business documents and patient-information leaflets, you may occasionally find difficult words like ‘adumbrated’, ‘manifestation’, ‘commensurate’, ‘arboricultural’, ‘exudate’, ‘maceration’, ‘debridement’ and ‘dosimetry’ without explanation.

If you want to communicate clearly with a wide audience, everyday vocabulary will normally do the job best.

And if you do need to use specialist terms when writing to a non-specialist audience, consider adding ‘explainer’ panels to help.



Here are a few high-level words and phrases that can easily be replaced:

ascertain

commence

consequently

despite the fact that

erroneous

expenditure

expiration

indebtedness

monies

notwithstanding

particulars

prior to

representations

utilize



Here they are again with simpler, more easily understood alternative words and phrases alongside:

ascertain	find out
commence	start, begin
consequently	so, therefore
despite the fact that	despite, although, even though
erroneous	wrong, mistaken, false
expenditure	spending
expiration	end, expiry
indebtedness	debt
monies	money
notwithstanding	despite, even if, but
particulars	details
prior to	before
representations	comments
utilize	use



Sometimes you can simply substitute a common word for the more unusual one, or you may need to rephrase the sentence to make it clearer. Usually there will be little or no change of meaning. Have a look at these examples:



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Perhaps he or she meant:



You have sent us many letters but we still do not understand what your complaint is about.



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The physical condition of a property is a fundamental determinant of its quality.

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Example 2



The physical condition of a property is a fundamental determinant of its quality.

What do you think the author was trying to say?
It's hard to know, but perhaps he or she meant:



The quality of a house depends mainly on its condition.



Example 3



Following a service outage at one of our data centres earlier today some customers may experience difficulties in receiving email. Our engineers are working around the clock to alleviate the issue and emergency maintenance to our service has been scheduled for 00:00 to 02:00 on the morning of Thursday 10/04/XX.

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What do you think the author was trying to say?

Perhaps he or she meant:



There was a fault at one of our data centres today, so you may be having difficulty getting email. We're sorry about this and our engineers are working on the problem now. There will also be special maintenance to our service from midnight till 2am on 10 April 20XX.



Example 4



At retirement age, your choices will include the open market option.

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Perhaps he or she meant:



At retirement age, you can decide to buy your pension from any company you choose. This is called the open-market option.



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We believe investment flexibility is a vital element to retirement provision.

How could you say it more clearly?



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So don't be afraid to use everyday words your readers are likely to know. They'll often be the best way of saying what you mean.



4 Getting the grammar right

Grammar broadly means putting the right words in the right order so that your writing conveys your intended meaning to another person.

People worry about grammar because they think others will belittle them if they get it wrong. And they're right to think this, because it does happen. Bad grammar may amuse pedantic people who think they get it right all the time, and may thus feel superior. Yet not all the rules of grammar are hard and fast, and people who study grammar often disagree about what's right, wrong or merely conventional. They may even disagree about the grammar of standard English, which is seen as the 'best' grammar for business writing but is spoken in the UK by only a few of the population. So if someone corrects a grammatical mistake they think you've made, check whether they're right and (if they are) learn from it. You won't be the only one to make the same mistake.



Here are some examples of bad grammar. You don't need to be an expert to spot them. You'll probably be able to tell that something is wrong from how they sound to you.

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Motorways is the safest type of road in the country.

What's the problem?



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Answer: The author means to say that the conference will take place at Hotel Londinium, but actually says, 'the venue...will take place'. Better to write **'that the venue for the conference will be...'** or **'that the conference will take place...'**.



Example 3



We are aiming to relaunch our Easy Reading guidance to raise awareness among staff who regularly write reports and documents. How much would Mrs Hobbs charge at speaking at such an event and what the content might be?

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- 2 'How much...and what the content might be?' doesn't make sense. The author meant to write, 'and what would the content be?' or 'and what topics would she cover?'

You get a bonus point if you noticed that 'reports and documents' reads oddly, since reports are a kind of document. The author could have said 'reports and other documents'.



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Example 5



From a beer-bottle label

Voopers Ales and Stout are brewed using the top fermentation method and natural bottle conditioning, resulting in a characteristic fine sediment forming in the bottle. This sediment is completely natural and can be gently mixed before drinking or poured carefully, leaving the sediment in the bottle.

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What's the problem?



Answer: In the second sentence, it's nonsense to say that the sediment can be poured carefully, leaving the sediment behind. What's poured is the drink.



Example 6



From a mailshot

As a previous delegate to a past event Introline are pleased to announce the following conference.

What's the problem?



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Answer: It sounds as if Introline is the 'previous delegate'. Also, it is unlikely that just because you were a delegate, Introline has set up another conference! The sentence should perhaps begin: 'As you have attended our events in the past, Introline is pleased to announce a conference about...'



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Answer: The words 'reason' and 'because' are doing the same job, so one of them should be deleted as pointless repetition (which is bad style), for example: 'The dahlias didn't grow because...' or 'The reason the dahlias didn't grow is that...'



Example 8



We noticed after you had left the hotel that room 10's key was missing. We wondered whether you had found it in your luggage when you arrived home. If so, please contact us on 0000 and the key put in the post to us.

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We noticed after you had left the hotel that room 10's key was missing. We wondered whether you had found it in your luggage when you arrived home. If so, please contact us on 0000 and the key put in the post to us.

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Answer: The final sentence is wrong. The author wants the reader to do two things: 'contact us' and 'return the key to us by post'. As written, the author doesn't make the second point. Of course, it's a trivial mistake and the meaning is clear enough.



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Answer: 'impartiality' is singular but 'are' is plural'. For the grammar to be right, they need to agree because they are the grammatical subject and the verb it governs. It's an easy mistake to make because 'schools' is plural, which may have distracted the author.



Before you send a document, text or email, always check it carefully. This will help you pick up grammatical and spelling mistakes that detract from the professional finish you want.



5 Being brief

Readers are usually busy people. You waste their time if you make them read more than they have to. The delete button is your friend, and the reader's. So, without being blunt or rude, you need to cut waffle and keep to the point. You can do this by examining everything you write and ruthlessly culling unnecessary and long-winded expressions. There are two questions you need to keep asking yourself as you review your stuff:



5 Being brief

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- **Why am I saying this?**
- **Why would anyone want to know this?**

Even those two questions are too long. They really amount to the single question, **SO WHAT?**

If you decide that a thing is worth saying, your job is then to be crisp about it. Look at these examples and see how you can make them more concise.



Example 1



Archway is a high-demand borough where demand for social housing exceeds supply.

How could you say it more briefly?



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Perhaps:

In Archway, demand for social housing exceeds supply.

Or, more colourfully:

In Archway, too many people are chasing too few homes.



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Example 2



We are writing to bring a matter of the utmost importance to your attention regarding a current scam that has been brought to our attention.

That sentence from a financial adviser to a client has many redundant words, and repeats a phrase about bringing something to somebody's attention. What could you say instead that would warn the reader but sound clear and calm?



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That sentence from a financial adviser to a client has many redundant words, and repeats a phrase about bringing something to somebody's attention. What could you say instead that would warn the reader but sound clear and calm?



Perhaps:

We're writing to warn you about a clever new scam.



Example 3



I have been given your name and contact details with respect to your editorial services. Currently I am in the middle of the preparation of a Communications Strategy for the borough council and would like to be able to incorporate methods and elements of “plain speaking” into it so that is likely to be as comprehensible as possible to the members of the public who are our target audience. Would you be good enough to explain to me how your service could go about helping me undertake this task?

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I have been given your name and contact details with respect to your editorial services. Currently I am in the middle of the preparation of a Communications Strategy for the borough council and would like to be able to incorporate methods and elements of “plain speaking” into it so that is likely to be as comprehensible as possible to the members of the public who are our target audience. Would you be good enough to explain to me how your service could go about helping me undertake this task?

How could you say it more briefly?



Perhaps:

I am preparing the council’s Communications Strategy. Please let me know how your editorial service could help me write it more clearly for the public.



Example 4



We specialize in the provision of Self-Invested Pension Plans and are the market leader in the provision of this type of plan.

How could you say it more briefly?



Example 4



We specialize in the provision of Self-Invested Pension Plans and are the market leader in the provision of this type of plan.

How could you say it more briefly?



Perhaps:

We specialize in providing Self-Invested Pension Plans. In fact, we are the market leader in them.

However, you'd want to avoid the ambiguous term 'market leader'. If you mean 'we sell more of them than any other firm', it's best to say that.



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Example 5



The purpose of this article is to advise all customers of the completion of the Customer Satisfaction Survey and associated results.

How could you say it more briefly?



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Example 5



The purpose of this article is to advise all customers of the completion of the Customer Satisfaction Survey and associated results.

How could you say it more briefly?



Perhaps:

This article gives the results of the Customer Satisfaction Survey.

(It's obvious that the survey has been completed, otherwise there'd be no results.)



Example 6



Plain English should always be used on forms and notices in order that they are capable of being understood by the people using them.

How could you say it more briefly?



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Perhaps:

Always use plain English in your forms and notices, then people will understand them.



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Example 7



Please note: this pot is fabricated by hand rather than machine made, so please allow for a small tolerance of 5mm or so in the outer dimensions.

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Example 7



Please note: this pot is fabricated by hand rather than machine made, so please allow for a small tolerance of 5mm or so in the outer dimensions.

How could you say it more briefly?



Perhaps:

! This pot is made by hand not machine, so the dimensions may differ by 5mm or so.



Make sure every word is worth its place on the page. If you find yourself writing ‘At this particular moment of time’, use ‘At present’, ‘Today’ or ‘Now’ instead. If you write ‘During the course of the day’ (which many weather forecasters put in their scripts), just put ‘During the day’.

Despite what some TV gardeners seem to think, ‘tiny little flower’ is a ridiculous expression: it’s either tiny or it’s little, so only one word is needed. And if they say or write, ‘I’ll take as many cuttings as I possibly can’, you’ll know that ‘possibly’ is redundant because it’s implicit in ‘can’ – ‘can’ is from ‘could’, which is about possibility.

Keep an eye out for those old favourites ‘consult with’ and ‘meet with’, as in: ‘I’ll consult with colleagues before meeting with Ms Pelling.’ Omit ‘with’ – twice! It’s redundant, even in US English, where it’s common.

Ruthlessly cut out waffle and unnecessary words.



6 Breaking up long sentences

I recommend you write sentences that average 15-20 words. Note the word 'average'. You need a mix of sentence lengths otherwise your writing will seem dull. Official and business English tends to have shorter sentences than it used to do, but there are occasional lapses especially in legalistic texts. Would busy readers easily make sense of this kind of thing in a merchant banker's report:



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'The planning permission does not include the construction of an additional store, or an extension to Tesco's, utilising the ground floor of the car park, as complications arose in the car park negotiations with the local authority, and it was deemed expedient to remove this element from the application in order to obtain a satisfactory permission on the remainder in time to allow the works to be completed, and the new units let, in time for Christmas trading this year.'



To rewrite it, we can start by jotting down the events in the story. These seem to be:

- 1 We wanted planning permission for an extra store but the council refused because of problems with car parking.**



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To rewrite it, we can start by jotting down the events in the story. These seem to be:

- 1 We wanted planning permission for an extra store but the council refused because of problems with car parking.**
- 2 So we removed the extra store from the planning application.**
- 3 As a result we got a satisfactory planning permission.**
- 4 Building went ahead and the new units were open for Christmas trading.**

Then we can put the points in the best order, which in this case is probably chronological (time sequence): 1-2-3-4. We can put each in a short sentence, perhaps like this:



‘We wanted the planning permission to include the building of an extra store or an extension to Tesco’s, using the ground floor of the car park. But we had to drop this after difficulties with the local council. The alteration enabled us to get a satisfactory permission on the rest of the scheme. This meant building work could be done – and the new units let – in time for Christmas trading this year.’

One of the things you’ll notice is that I’ve put ‘we’ and ‘our’ into the writing, which helps readers to see who is doing what. See chapter 10, ‘Using personal words’.



Example 1



Please note that it is very important that you inform the authority if you are moved to a different prison and that, if you are liberated from prison, you give the authority details of your new address and any address to which you move so it always has your current address for correspondence about the case.

How could you split up the long sentence?

Hint: there's a lot of redundant information here.



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How could you split up the long sentence?

Hint: there's a lot of redundant information here.



Perhaps:

You must tell the authority if you are moved to a different prison. If you are released from prison, you must make sure the authority always knows your current address.



Example 2



The referral of customer complaints to head office carries resource implications, and it is therefore highly desirable that the business conducts itself in such a way that fewer complaints arise, and when they are made, as many as possible are resolved as quickly and as closely as possible to the source, either within the teams responsible or otherwise at a local level, with only the most difficult complaints being referred to head office.

This is hard to disentangle. What would you do?

Hint: try to write it in small chunks, and convert 'resource implications' into normal English.



Example 2



The referral of customer complaints to head office carries resource implications, and it is therefore highly desirable that the business conducts itself in such a way that fewer complaints arise, and when they are made, as many as possible are resolved as quickly and as closely as possible to the source, either within the teams responsible or otherwise at a local level, with only the most difficult complaints being referred to head office.

This is hard to disentangle. What would you do?

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Perhaps:

It's costly for head office to deal with customers' complaints. So the business should:

- conduct itself in a way that leads to fewer complaints, and
- resolve complaints within the relevant team or otherwise at a local level.

You should refer only the most difficult cases to head office.

Readers love full stops. Make sure you use plenty of them, and in the right places.



7 Punctuating well

Punctuating well is as important as choosing the best words. Without it, writing soon becomes incoherent and falls apart.

A good way of delving deeply into this essential skill is to study the punctuation of the quality daily newspapers. You'll see the full range of marks and nearly always they'll be in the right places, helping authors to be clear and precise. Often this is because the text has been professionally subedited. By contrast, you'll sometimes notice gross errors of punctuation in company websites, shop notices, sales letters and even letters from schools to parents.

Getting the punctuation right is not too difficult, especially as there are only a few marks in standard English and the main rules are fairly simple.



- **Full stop** (US, 'period'): to show a complete break at the end of a sentence. In simple terms, a sentence is a complete statement that makes sense in its own right. It usually has a subject and a finite (finished) verb, like 'The ship sank.' or 'The ship sank like a stone.' or 'The ship sank like a stone to the bottom of the sea where it lay for 200 years until naval divers raised it to the surface and it was put in a museum.'



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It's important to know how to punctuate at the **sentence boundary**, which is where one sentence ends and another begins. In social-media posts and other informal writing, the boundary is a troubled place where authors aren't sure what to do (or don't think it matters what they do). Increasingly, authors of formal letters, reports and emails also seem to punctuate haphazardly at the boundary, as if they've forgotten everything they were (or should have been) taught at school.



At the boundary, the normal punctuation mark is a full stop or semicolon. Here's an example from a water company:

Most of us don't realise how much water we use, with many guessing less than 50 litres each per day. On average each of us uses around 140 litres per day, this amount may be much higher during the kind of hot weather we've seen recently.



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Most of us don't realise how much water we use, with many guessing less than 50 litres each per day. On average each of us uses around 140 litres per day, this amount may be much higher during the kind of hot weather we've seen recently.

Take each punctuation mark in turn. The comma after 'use' is good, as the fragment that follows adds detail to the main clause and doesn't have a finite verb of its own. If the fragment weren't present, a full stop would be correct at this point.

The full stop after 'each per day' is good, because that marks the boundary where the author finishes talking about what people think or guess. But the comma after '140 litres per day' is bad. You can see that there's a full sentence either side of the comma (each sentence has its own finite verb ('uses' and 'be'), so the comma should be a full stop. A comma is rarely enough to cope with the boundary between two complete sentences; it causes the readers to miscue, which reduces their fluency.



When you use the right punctuation, you help the readers to predict what's coming next, and prediction is an important part of fluent reading.

That said, instead of a full stop after '140 litres a day', you could use a semicolon. This is because a semicolon (as we'll see in the next few pages) is feasible when there are complete sentences either side of the mark **but they make closely related points.**

Be sure to avoid the kind of punctuation-free writing found in this example from a major UK retailer, John Lewis, in response to a customer's question about a faulty roman blind:



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Be sure to avoid the kind of punctuation-free writing found in this example from a major UK retailer, John Lewis, in response to a customer's question about a faulty roman blind:



I am contacting you regarding your query about the blind that you had fitted back in 20XX I have searched through our systems and the software of the Cheadle branch sadly I am unable to find any order of this age most of our blinds only have a warranty of a maximum of five years unfortunately we would be unable to provide any kind of service at this point without confirmation that the warranty was extended any further



This looks careless and incompetent and would seem wrong to most schoolchildren, let alone a firm that prides itself on customer service. Look for the sentence boundaries. Where would you put full stops (and even some commas)?

I've marked my choices here in red:



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I am contacting you regarding your query about the blind that you had fitted back in 20XX. I have searched through our systems and the software of the Cheadle branch. Sadly, I am unable to find any order of this age. Most of our blinds only have a warranty of a maximum of five years. Unfortunately, we would be unable to provide any kind of service at this point without confirmation that the warranty was extended any further.

I hope you'll agree that the addition of those seven punctuation marks – and the capital letters at the start of each sentence – significantly improves clarity and reading ease. It seems perverse to omit them.



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So:

If I were you, there'd be two of us the same.

Or, using a pair of commas to cordon off a detail:

Alex Smith, who will start work soon as the new chief executive, is a former professional footballer who left school at 16 without any paper qualifications.



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You can see the effective use of commas in the next example:

In 1969, Jimi Hendrix and his Band of Gypsys closed the Woodstock festival with what many regard as the finest performance of his life in front of a bedraggled, sleep-starved throng who had endured rain, mud, performance delays and dubious toilets. Some critics called his apocalyptic version of the Star Spangled Banner unpatriotic but, as a former paratrooper, Hendrix thought he'd earned the right to play the anthem in his own unique way.



The comma after 1969 could be omitted but is normal where there's a pause after a context-setting time point. The commas after bedraggled, rain and mud separate words in a list. In US English and books published by Oxford University Press, there'd also be a comma after delays (the so-called Oxford comma). The pair of commas in the second sentence cordons off a detail from Hendrix's background; that sentence would make sense without the text within the pair of commas.



Apostrophe: to show that one or more letters are missing, as in:

- That's a giraffe.
- Who's that girl?
- There's been an accident investigation.

Remember that the only times to put an apostrophe in **its** are when it's short for **it is** or **it has**.



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Remember that the only times to put an apostrophe in **its** are when it's short for **it is** or **it has**.

Apostrophes also show possession:

- My friend's dog (one friend).
- My friends' preferences were ignored (several friends).
- My children's hobbies include chess and cricket.

Note that the apostrophe comes immediately after the person or people or things that are doing the possessing. So ask yourself who or what possesses. Then put the apostrophe immediately after it. In the final example, 'children' possess the hobbies, so the apostrophe follows then. This all seems such a simple rule, but what confusion it causes!



And don't forget the rule about **its** above. So if you write:

- **Its head is sky-blue**

then there's no apostrophe in **its** because **its** is a word in its own right. It means 'belonging to it'. The possession is inbuilt.

Normally, there's no apostrophe in ordinary plurals where there's no possession, so these apostrophes will all be wrong:

- **Tomatoes' and other vegetables' for sale**
- **Fish and chips'**
- **Slow down: frogs' and toads' cross here**
- **Farmers' drove their tractors' onto the showground**



See how you get on with these examples.

How should the author reorganize and punctuate this?

Example 1



Thank you for your prompt reply, yes we would like to proceed and our order number is 4365737 this is attached.



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Thank you for your prompt reply, yes we would like to proceed and our order number is 4365737 this is attached.

Perhaps like this:



Thank you for your prompt reply. Yes, we would like to proceed and our order number is 4365737. The order is attached.



How should the author reorganize and punctuate this?

Example 2



I have just taken over from Jane Jackson in this post, I see we have a course booked for 22 Jan at Dodge House, I have had a few enquiries regarding this course, I have information from the last course that you ran in October, the pre-course booklet, would this be ok for me to give to prospective delegates.



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How should the author reorganize and punctuate this?

Example 3



Thanks for sending me through this information however I was hoping to look at the actual detailed programmes not the course outlines, is it possible to send me these through today.



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I feel that my level of writing skills is already high however, I did learn a lot today.



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Better would be:



I feel that my level of writing skills is already high. However, I did learn a lot today.



How should the author punctuate this?

Example 5



Kimtex keeps the foot dry and comfortable with it's advanced moisture-transport capabilities.



How should the author punctuate this?

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Kimtex keeps the foot dry and comfortable with it's advanced moisture-transport capabilities.



Simple: remove the apostrophe as possession is built into [its](#).
(Then write 'moisture-transport capabilities' in normal English!)



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Simple: remove the apostrophe as possession is built into [its](#). (Then write 'moisture-transport capabilities' in normal English!)

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Example 6



Exam's Are In Progress Please Do Not Wait On These Step's.



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Simple: remove the apostrophe as possession is built into **its**. (Then write 'moisture-transport capabilities' in normal English!)

How should the author punctuate this?

Example 6



Exam's Are In Progress Please Do Not Wait On These Step's.

The apostrophes need to be removed as exams and steps are just ordinary plurals. While we're about it, we may as well get rid of all the crazy capitals as well. So the result would be:



Exams are in progress. Please do not wait on these steps.



- **Semi-colon (;)** has two main purposes.





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’ **First**, it separates two closely related statements that would otherwise be complete sentences because they each have a finite verb:



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■ **First**, it separates two closely related statements that would otherwise be complete sentences because they each have a finite verb:

- Please let us have your comments by 3pm; we need to send our reply tonight.
- Some people think semicolons are pretentious punctuation that nobody should have to learn about; of course, they're entitled to their opinion.

You can see that in each case, a full stop would be OK; but a semicolon is better because it tells the reader that the statements make closely related points.



Second, it can separate items in a list, as an alternative to commas, especially when one or more of the listed items already include one or more commas:



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- By early 2024, the Horizon scandal had become a miscarriage of justice in three acts: first, hundreds of people were hauled through the courts for crimes they hadn't committed, with several taking their own lives and many going to prison; next, there was a cover-up by company officials, lawyers and civil servants, who knew (or should have known) that the software had been faulty from the day it was installed; and finally, the government was stirred into action by a TV drama that outraged public opinion.

Of course, you could set out that long sentence in other, clearer ways, such as a bullet-point list. But the use of three semicolons as major dividers helps to show readers where the main breaks occur after the colon signifies a long pause and that a list is coming.

Sometimes, you'll also see semicolons used to separate items in vertical lists, especially in legal documents.



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- **Colon (:) has several main purposes, including these:**
- To introduce a vertical or horizontal list when there's also a substantial pause, as in the Horizon example above.
- To act as a stop that predicts the arrival of important news – 'The possibilities were equally dangerous: to advance or to retreat.' This is why you can think of it as a 'why-because marker'.
- To herald a subtitle in an academic paper – 'Skiving for experts: how to look busy while avoiding work.'
- To introduce a quotation when there's a substantial pause.

A colon does not need to be accompanied by a dash... ever.



Quotation marks (' ') indicate the opening and closing of direct speech:



Quotation marks (‘ ’) indicate the opening and closing of direct speech:

‘There is no alternative,’ said the prime minister.

Some people prefer to use double quotation marks, using single quotation marks to surround a quotation within a quotation. Quotation marks are sometimes used to draw attention to the first use of a technical word or a supposedly novel idea. Try not to use quotation marks to apologize for jargon or misuse of a word – think of a better expression. Avoid straight quotation marks, which are really for feet and inches.



C **Capital letters** are for the first letter of a sentence; a person's name and courtesy title; the name of a country, county, town or village and specific organizations – Amnesty International, the British Legion; and Acts of Parliament. Other uses of capitals are common within organizations but would be rare in the press, for example:



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Products:

Personal Life Assurance Plan; Home Development Loan.


Parts of the organization:

Finance Division; Customer Service Team.

Job titles of top officials:

Information Commissioner; Chief Executive.



 **Hyphen (-)** links words that form a composite adjective before a noun – for example, **computer-based work, short-term goals, out-of-hours work, time-consuming effort, long-term gains, PC-based network, pop-up shop.**

Some nouns formed by two or more words need hyphens, such as **run-up, build-up, shake-up, free-for-all, call-out.** These are called composite nouns.

If you think hyphens are rare birds and should be minimized, that's your choice. But do have a look at how they are used in quality newspapers and books from established publishers. You'll see they're remarkably common in writing that's been professionally subedited. They help people read fluently.



En dashes (–) with a space either side ('spaced en dashes') can be used in pairs to surround and emphasize an aside, addition or explanation.

Use a single, spaced en dash to indicate the start of an aside, addition or explanation that runs down to a full stop.

Use an unspaced en dash to indicate a range, eg 6.30–10.30pm, 1939–45 war, 11–13-year-old children (note the length of dashes and hyphens in this final one!)



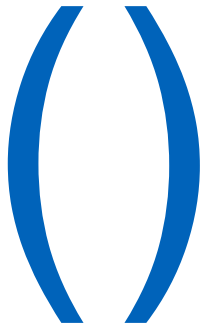
Square brackets [] (US: 'brackets') show that the text within does not belong to the document or quotation but is being inserted for clarity.

He [Mr Jones] told me to buzz off home.



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Brackets () are also called round brackets or, in the US, ‘parentheses’. They surround an aside, explanation or addition that is relatively unimportant to the main text.

He described budgerigars as ‘egregious’ (outstandingly bad) but meant to say ‘gregarious’ (fond of company, living in flocks).



Punctuating vertical lists

Vertical lists, which are often bullet-pointed, should be punctuated in a coherent way, preferably not as dictated by Microsoft programs. I suggest a simple approach based on two main rules.



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Vertical lists, which are often bullet-pointed, should be punctuated in a coherent way, preferably not as dictated by Microsoft programs. I suggest a simple approach based on two main rules.

- 1 If the listed items have a main verb and look like freestanding sentences, they start with a capital and end with a full stop.
- 2 If the introductory ('platform') statement creates one complete sentence with all the listed items, then the listed items start with a lower-case letter and the final item closes with a stop. This is because the listed items are fragments of the larger sentence.



This gives us two types of list.

Type 1, where each item is a finished sentence/statement in its own right...

The job includes: [unfinished sentence intro]

- editing texts written by the staff
- training all staff to use Excel, and
- preparing ministerial briefings.



This gives us two types of list.

Type 1, where each item is a finished sentence/statement in its own right...

The job includes: [unfinished sentence intro]

- editing texts written by the staff
- training all staff to use Excel, and
- preparing ministerial briefings.

Type 2, where the whole list forms a single sentence...

The scheme has several parts: [finished-sentence intro]

- Locating places where speed-limit breaches create known dangers.
- Requiring highways staff to institute traffic-calming measures.
- Working with local police to set up regular patrols.

In type 1, make sure the platform statement leads correctly on to each listed item. In type 2, it's often good to have 'parallel structure' in the listed items; in the above case they all start with a verb ending in -ing.



Can you see what's wrong with how the following list has been set up?



Before returning this form, please:

- check you have fully completed it
- signed and dated it
- enclosed the patient's consent form
- enclosed your proofs of identity.



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Answer: the word 'please' in the platform statement doesn't read on to three of the listed items. As the message here is all about checking things, perhaps the best way to fix the problem is to lift the 'check' idea into the platform statement, so you'd get:



Before returning this form, please check that you have:

- fully completed it
- signed and dated it
- enclosed the patient's consent form
- enclosed your proofs of identity.



8 Using active-voice verbs

When we speak, most of us use active-voice verbs. This generally means we put the doer before the verb. In this sentence, the doer 'horses' comes before the verb (doing word or time-action word) 'eat':

The horses will eat all the hay.

So 'eat' is called an active-voice verb (**active verb** for short).



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Here's another example:

Active – **The tenant must pay the rent monthly.**

Passive – **The rent must be paid by the tenant monthly.**



The active is usually shorter and easier to understand. The passive can be useful if you want the reader to focus on the thing being acted upon, in this case the rent, or if you don't want to mention the doer at all (eg, 'Details can be found on our website.')

The general point is: favour the use of active verbs. Make sure at least 90% of your verbs are active. Software tools such as StyleWriter – the Plain English Editor, can help with this and many other matters. You can get details from www.editorsoftware.com.

Just one other thing to remember: 'passive' is nothing to do with 'past'. It's about who or what is doing the action in the sentence and where that doer is positioned relative to the verb it governs. It's not about when the action was done.



Put these examples into the active voice:

Example 1



All fire doors and other fire-prevention devices will be checked and repaired by us where necessary.



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All fire doors and other fire-prevention devices will be checked and repaired by us where necessary.

Active voice:



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Minor repair work will be carried out by our team after your tenancy starts.



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Active voice:



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Example 2



Minor repair work will be carried out by our team after your tenancy starts.

Active voice:



Our team will do minor repairs after your tenancy starts.

There's more on active-voice verbs in *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*.



9 Making your writing verby

It's a good idea to make your writing 'verby', full of vigorous verbs that express the action in every sentence. If you smother your verbs by using nouns (names of things) you'll squeeze the life out of your writing.

Here are some examples. How would you make them more verby?

Example 1



We will undertake the preparation of the report.



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Example 1



We will undertake the preparation of the report.

More verby:



We will prepare the report.

You can see that 'prepare' was smothered by 'preparation', which had to be supported by 'undertake'. This produced a classic example of verbose, 'nouny' English.



Example 2



We can make a recommendation to the board for the acceptance of the proposal.



Example 2



We can make a recommendation to the board for the acceptance of the proposal.

More verby:



We can recommend that the board accepts the proposal. (Or: We can recommend to the board that it accepts the proposal.)

You can see that the verbs 'recommend' and 'accept' replace the nouns 'recommendation' and 'acceptance'. This creates a sentence that's simple, short and conversational.



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We can make a recommendation to the board for the acceptance of the proposal.

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Example 3



They made a decision to set up a residents association.



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Example 3



They made a decision to set up a residents association.

More verby:



They decided to set up a residents association.



Example 4



The starting point for consideration by the committee was the evidence in the Smith case.



Example 4



The starting point for consideration by the committee was the evidence in the Smith case.

More verby:



The committee started by considering the evidence in the Smith case.

Now the author focuses on the main action in the sentence, which is that the committee 'starts' something. Then everything else falls into place.



10 Using personal words

When appropriate, use words like 'I', 'we' and 'you' in your writing. This will help make it more human. But don't address your readers (or listeners) by such terms as 'those of you' or 'some of you' – every reader (or listener) is an individual not a crowd.

You can often transform a piece of lofty, distant and impersonal writing about, say, the rights and responsibilities of tenants or elderly people, by replacing all the references to 'tenants' and 'elderly people' with the word 'you'. You can then refer to your own organization as 'we'. This will produce text that's more informal and makes more sense to the readers because they can see themselves in it. Many web pages, agreements and official leaflets adopt this style.



If you also use plenty of active-voice verbs, you'll find that your writing becomes much easier to read.

How would you make the following two examples more personal?

Example 1



If someone is deemed by us to be ineligible for an assessment of housing need there is a right to request the council to make a review of that decision.



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How would you make the following two examples more personal?

Example 1



If someone is deemed by us to be ineligible for an assessment of housing need there is a right to request the council to make a review of that decision.

Perhaps:



If we decide you do not qualify for an assessment of housing need, you can ask us to review that decision.

Or, even more personal:

If we decide you do not qualify for us to assess your housing need, you can ask us to review our decision.

In the next example, think hard about how to break up the information into manageable chunks so that the readers can see clearly the stages of the process.



Example 2



The council has adopted a two-stage assessment process whereby an initial assessment will be made for every housing application received. The second stage will verify the information assessed and if an applicant receives sufficient priority they will be placed on the Active Housing Register.



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Perhaps:



When you apply for housing, we use a four-stage process:

- 1 We make an initial assessment.
- 2 We check that the information you have given is correct.
- 3 We give you a priority rating.
- 4 If your priority is high enough, we put you on the Active Housing Register.

As you can see, I've also used a list and split up the original two stages even further so they'll make more sense to outsiders. Doing this kind of thing is not easy. As an author, you have to think hard about how to split the information into manageable chunks; but the benefits to the reader will often be clear and tangible.



11 Writing better instructions

Instructions are orders or commands. Do this, do that. Please do this, please do that. They explain how to carry out some action or process in a preferred or mandatory way. So they need to be clear and easy to follow, otherwise the users won't do what they're supposed to do, or may do the right thing but in the wrong order or at the wrong time.

Here are some main principles to follow when writing instructions.



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Here are some main principles to follow when writing instructions.

Principle 1

Think about the readers

How much are they likely to know about the task? It's probably far less than you know, so you may need to set out the actions in short steps, perhaps numbered. Technical language will baffle many users, so you'll need to name things carefully and consistently, and explain any essential technical terms.



Principle 2

Divide the task into headed sections

A typical first section will be an introductory explanation, overview or summary. For experienced users, you can also include a quick-start section. Further headed sections will deal with the tools or materials required; definitions or explanations of any technical terms; warnings; and main text.

The main text will set out detailed actions, probably under headed subsections. All these headings help users to read the instructions in small chunks and find what they need when they need it. A contents list at the start will also help with this.



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Principle 3

Use clear illustrations with good labels and captions

Principle 4

Split the information into manageable chunks, perhaps using bullet lists or short paragraphs



Principle 5

Prefer a basic style of language

This mainly means using the imperative (command) form of verbs. So, do not write 'The carrots should be washed, peeled and chopped' when you could write 'Wash, peel and chop the carrots'. This style saves words and gives you a simple word order that puts the action first in each sentence. Almost all instructional statements should use the imperative.



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Principle 6

Test the draft instructions with typical first-time users who have little or no knowledge of the task

This will help show you where users are likely to go wrong, enabling you to redraft accordingly.

See *The Oxford Guide to Plain English* for examples and more details.



12 Using a simple way to plan

It's always a good idea to take a few minutes to plan any email or letter that will include more than a handful of points. But before you plan, you need to think about **purpose**. Why are you writing this – what do you want to achieve? And who will the readers be – will they be people who know a lot about the topic or those who are new to it? You can then jot down your content points in a random way, so you'll easily be able to see how to group like with like and put the points in the best order.

A bubble diagram is an easy way of doing this. You simply put each of your points in a bubble, join them with lines to show how you'll group them into paragraphs, cross out points not worth making, then number everything in the right order.

The next few pages show typical stages of a bubble diagram where Mr J, who works from home, plans an email to the supplier who has left him without a working phone line.



MIS-SOLD
CONTRACT

TELEPHONE LINE
DISCONNECTED

CHARGED FOR
SERVICE
NOT RECEIVED

POOR
COMMUNICATION

DIFFICULT TO
TO CONTACT

TWO MONTHS
WITHOUT
SERVICE

EMAILS NOT
ANSWERED

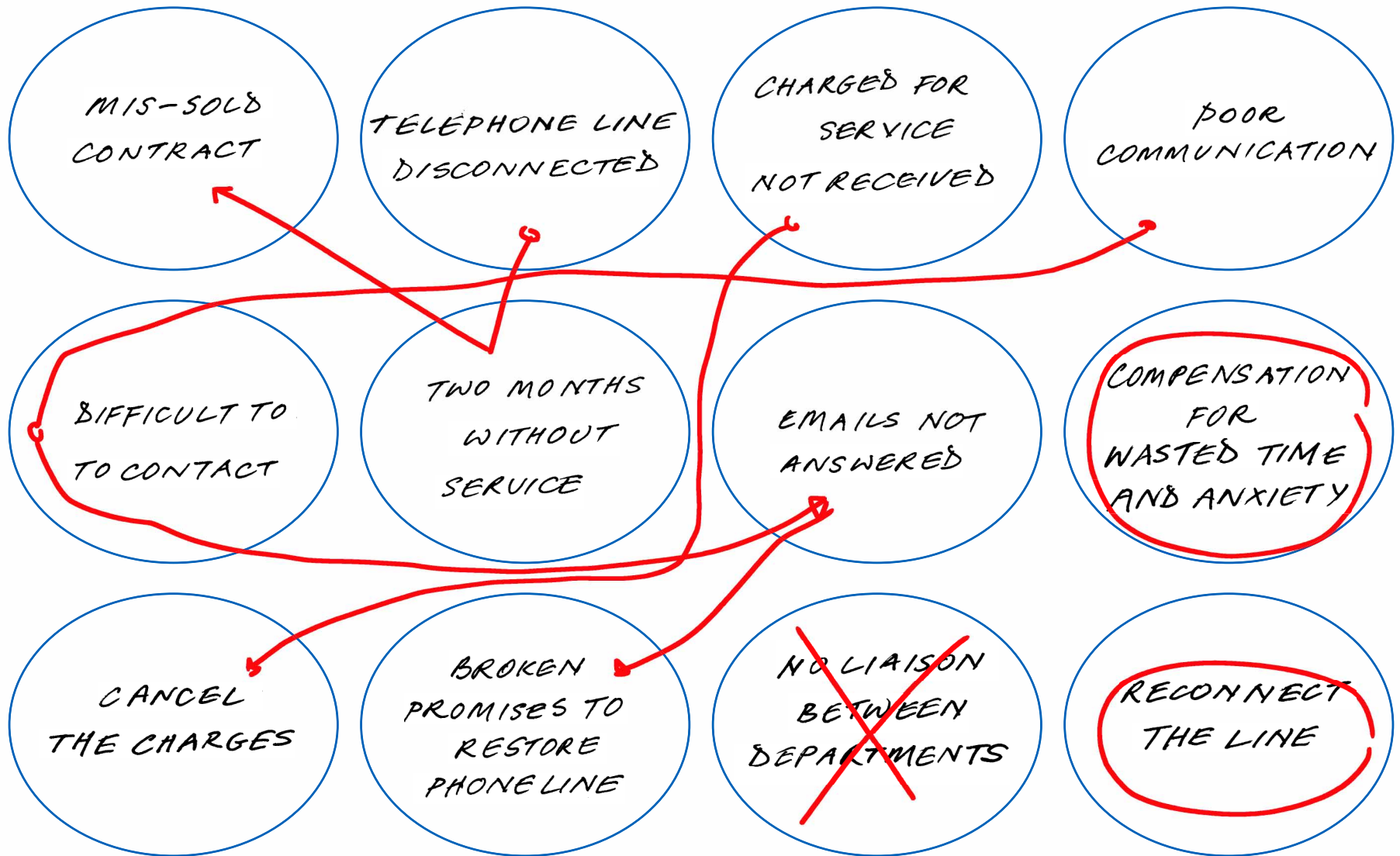
COMPENSATION
FOR
WASTED TIME
AND ANXIETY

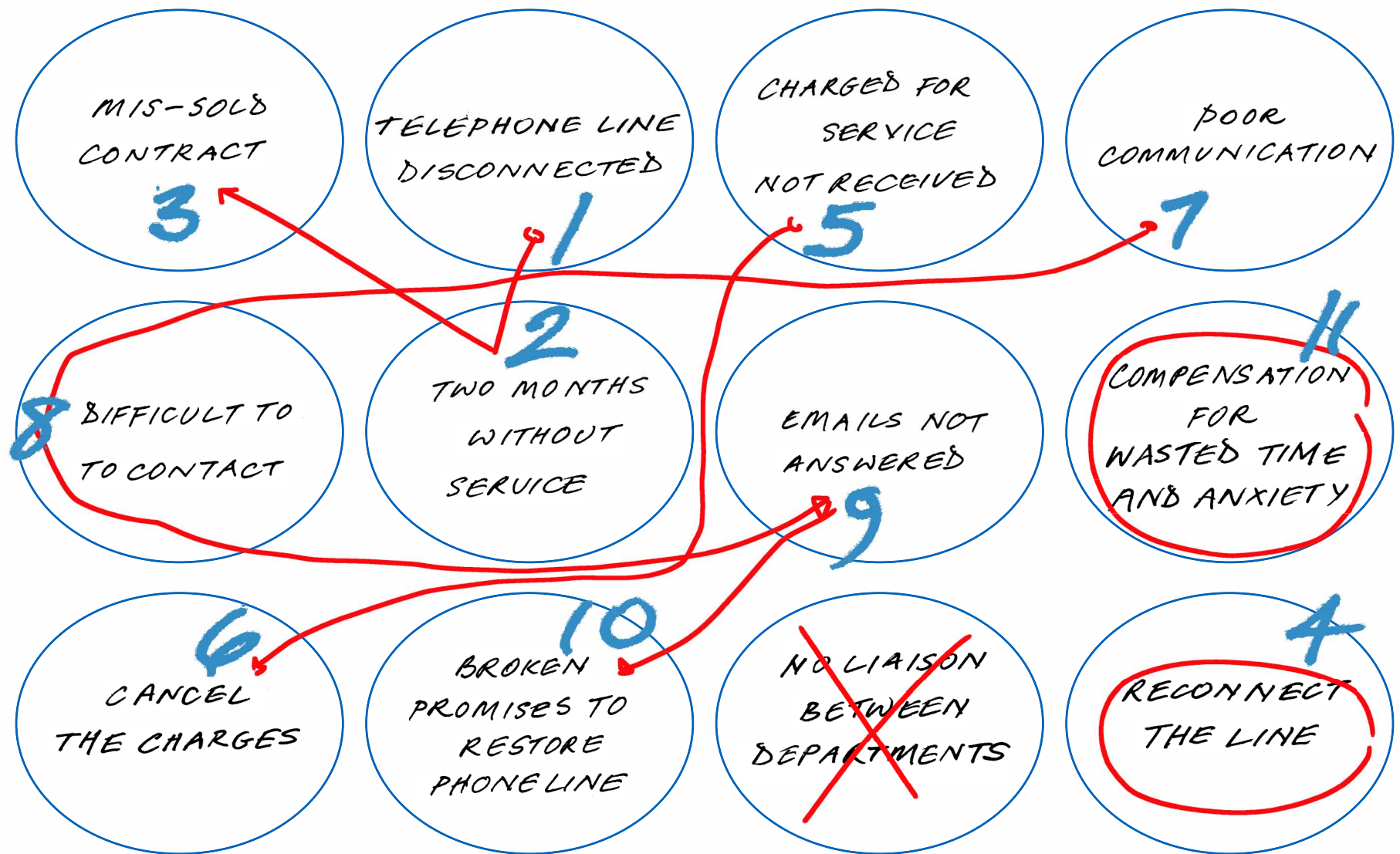
CANCEL
THE CHARGES

BROKEN
PROMISES TO
RESTORE
PHONE LINE

NO LIAISON
BETWEEN
DEPARTMENTS

RECONNECT
THE LINE







Possible draft email based on the bubble diagram

Breach of contract

Failure to install a phone line at 4 Ash Road, SW37 9RP

I still lack a working phone line after you removed my line two months ago and promised to replace it quickly. This has breached your contract with me, meaning you have mis-sold your product.

Please ensure you install a working line within seven days.

I have also been charged for a phone service I have not received. Please ensure you withdraw the charges.

Your communications have been inadequate. Several times, your complaints line has not answered my calls or answered them only after long delays. You have repeatedly ignored my emails and broken your promises to fix the problem.

I expect compensation for the anxiety you have caused and for the time I've had to waste asking you to put things right.



Mr J can now hone that draft so it says exactly what he intends. The bubble diagram may look like a time-consuming step but it will have saved Mr J time by helping him organize. Otherwise, with 11 points to make, his brain has to decide the best order from the 11-factorial possibilities, all 39.92 million of them.

Typical orders are chronological (time sequence) and news triangle (order of importance to the reader, so put the big news first). In longer documents, you can organize your points under headed sections, perhaps using questions and answers.

Your letter or email will also benefit from a clear and predictive main heading saying what it's about and helping the reader predict what you're going to cover. This heading need not be short: a detailed heading may save many words later.

You may want to end with one or more calls to action, where you say what you'd like readers to do next.

If you'll be writing reports and other longer documents, see the planning chapter in the *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*.



13 Avoiding common pitfalls in word choice

English is full of words that sound similar or the same but are spelt differently and therefore mean something entirely different. Bear differs from bare, its from it's, new from knew, marshal from martial, style from stile, principal from principle, horse from hoarse, source from sauce, course from coarse, earn from urn, which from witch, sort from sought, born from borne (and bourne), and Appalachian from appellation.

And just to keep people on their toes there are even a few words like 'cleave' that have two opposite meanings (to split apart and to stay together) – the intended meaning can be deduced only from the context.

This section looks at a few of these troublesome words and phrases.



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Except means to make an exception of or leave out from, and is much rarer.



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Accept is correct because it means receive or take.



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Excepted is (probably) correct because it (probably) means that the tax regime won't apply to insurance.



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It's **flaunt**, which means to show off or display.



Practise, in British English, means to keep trying at something with the aim of getting better at it.



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Practice, in British English, means an act or event of practising, like a cricket or football practice, or a business like a doctor's practice.

It's easily remembered by thinking about **advise** and **advice**. The first is a verb and the second is a noun, and they are pronounced differently.

In American English, **practice** is both the verb and the noun, which saves a lot of worry.



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As the director has apparently given conclusive proof, **refuted** is likely to be correct.



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The preacher argued that since beautiful things could be created only by God, then the universe, as a beautiful thing, must have been divinely created. **'That's begging the question,'** cried a heckler.



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Is this correct?

The government's crackdown on illegal drugs **begs many unanswered questions.**

No – the author must mean that it **raises** many unanswered questions, if traditional standard English is the norm.



Is this correct?

I also hope to keep you **appraised** of key decisions that **effect** us as chess players.



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I also hope to keep you **appraised** of key decisions that **effect** us as chess players.

No – to ‘**appraise**’ means to consider the qualities of something or somebody. The author could have used a simple verb like ‘**informed**’, but was probably thinking of the rare verb ‘**apprised**’. (‘To apprise’ means ‘to inform’.)

The verb ‘**effect**’ should have been ‘**affect**’ in this sentence, because ‘to effect’ is an unusual way of saying ‘to do’ or ‘to bring about’ – as in ‘to effect a repair’ – whereas ‘to affect’ means to alter, change or modify something.



14 Avoiding clichés

Clichés are expressions that suffer from overuse: fresh as a daisy, good as gold, cool as a cucumber, cold as ice, home sweet home, sweet as a nut, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sports-speak is full of them: at the end of the day, at this particular moment in time, game of two halves, to be fair, to be honest, the first goal will be crucial, she missed when it looked easier to score, etc.

You'll also have heard broadcasters regularly using 'rolling hills', 'only time will tell', 'the devil is in the detail', 'tip of the iceberg', and 'breathtaking views'. All are clichés.

Clichés are harmless except to linguistically sensitive people whose blood pressure they raise, but it's best to use as few as possible. Otherwise you'll sound like a dull writer or speaker who cannot think for yourself. Try to cultivate your own voice, using your own words. Don't use hackneyed phrases whose originality has been eroded by overuse.



Here are a few more examples:

fundamentally flawed

grinding poverty

the jury's still out (unless a real jury really is still out)

haven for wildlife

level playing field (unless you're a surveyor)

leave no stone unturned

in this day and age

hive of activity

shadow of its former self

we take all complaints very seriously

lessons have been learnt

You'll find more on clichés in *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*.



15 Ignoring myths about writing

Genuine rules of grammar can help us all write clearly but many people have myths foisted on them as well, sometimes at school but often in the workplace. If your employer insists you obey the dictates of these myths or others like them, you don't have much choice in the matter. If written down in a company style guide, though, you can lobby to get the guide changed. Use evidence from such books as *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (ed. Robert Burchfield, OUP) and *The Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Martin Cutts, OUP).

Here are four of the most common, and absurd, myths:



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Here are four of the most common, and absurd, myths:

Myth 1 You must not split your infinitives

If you put a word between 'to' and the verb word, as in a phrase like 'Is it ever acceptable to physically punish a child?', this splits the infinitive. But as it puts the stress exactly where you want it, it's good English.



Myth 2 You must not begin a sentence with 'But' or 'However'

By putting But or However at the start of a sentence, you are showing the reader that what you are about to say is contrary to or a variation of what you have just said. Great authors have been starting sentences with these words for hundreds of years. If Jane Austen could do it (and she did, regularly), so can you. And the same applies to any other word in English, provided that you've written a sentence that makes complete sense on its own. In other words, you can start a sentence with any word you like.



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Myth 3 You must not end sentences with prepositions (words like at, up, down, of, out, by, in, from)

These words often naturally occur at the end of sentences and, if your sentence reads rhythmically, there's no harm in it. So a sentence like, 'He was the kind of bully no-one could stand up to' is perfectly good English. You may also **begin** sentences with prepositions. Some companies have a policy that forbids their staff to do so, which is bizarre.



Myth 4 You must not use 'I' and 'we' in your reports

Words like 'I' are valuable in reports because they show who is taking responsibility for the actions. Of course, you can always use the name of a team or department instead, but this may become monotonous. The main point is that, for clarity, most of your sentences should have identifiable doers in them. Often the best doers will be 'I' or 'we'. Other personal pronouns are also helpful in letters and emails – you should generally address your reader(s) as 'you'.

You'll find more on this in chapter 10, and in *The Oxford Guide to Plain English*.



16 Checking for errors and absurdities

Authors need to check their stuff carefully before it goes out, whether it's a quick email or a formal letter or report. An occasional mistake may get through even after you've checked, but if there are several mistakes they will detract from the professional finish you want. Moreover, readers may discount what you're saying because the mistakes may devalue your work.

Here are a few real-life examples from business authors in the UK – can you spot the errors and absurdities? I haven't offered corrected versions, so you're on your own!



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Example 1



In follow up to our conversation he is a copy of our leaflets. The leaflet is aim at persons with low literacy levels.



Example 2



WHEN BREAKING UP A CAST-IRON BATH, YOU SHOULD WEAR PROPER EAR DEFENDERS AND NOTHING ELSE.



Example 2



WHEN BREAKING UP A CAST-IRON BATH, YOU SHOULD WEAR PROPER EAR DEFENDERS AND NOTHING ELSE.

Example 3



were anxious to expedite this matter and would be grateful to information requested and costings as soon as possible otherwise we will have to source other placements in addition K is currently placed at roderick house were it is agreed his needs are not being met however the delay in providing the info and costing has necessitated K remaining her we would expect you to review the current fee structure at this placement since the delay in moving K i.e reducing them.



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Example 4



The item of mail has been tampered with, the envelope was opened and then resealed, it was noticed to have been tampered with by the Postoffice in Slovakia, so the postman was instructed have the recipient open the item in his presents and other witnesses. The money was missing, the box on the envelope stating that £250.00 was enclosed had been crossed out. The postage included up to £250 insurance.



Good proofreading tactics include the following:

Read the document slowly for sense and punctuation. You're not skim-reading for information.

Read it slowly again, for spelling.

Use the spellchecker on your PC. It will pick up some of the false key-strokes, at least.

Check headings, footnotes, paragraph numbering and cross-references separately.

If time allows, print it out and check it on paper. Run your finger, or a pen, beneath the line of type you're checking.



17 Further reading

Burchfield R (ed) *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* OUP, 1996.

Cutts M *The Oxford Guide to Plain English* OUP, 2020.

Garner B *Garner's Modern English Usage* OUP, 2016.

Kimble J *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please* Carolina Academic Press, 2023.

Lewis N *Word Power Made Easy* Bloomsbury, 1990.

Manser MH (ed) *Good Word Guide* Bloomsbury, 2011.

Seely J *Everyday Grammar* OUP, 2001.

Thornton R *Adult Learners' Writing Guide* Chambers, 2006.

This easy-to-use self-study book informs and educates by using exercises, tests and practical real-world examples.

Useful websites

Plain Language Commission – <http://www.clearest.co.uk>

Gives you access to many free articles and books on plain language and related topics.

The British Council – <https://www.britishcouncil.org>

and

Cambridge English – <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org>

Both offer a wide range of resources (many free) for learners at all levels.

Clarity International – <https://www.clarity-international.org>

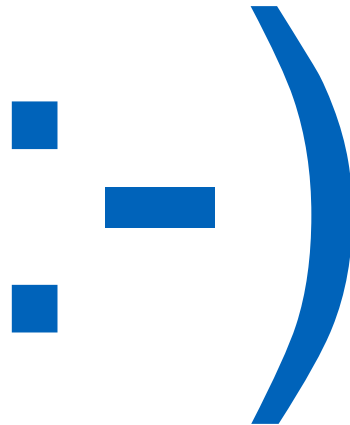
Group working for plain language among lawyers. Publishes the Clarity Journal.

International Plain Language Federation – <https://www.iplfederation.org>

Network of organizations working for plain language worldwide.

PLAIN – <https://plainlanguagenetwork.org>

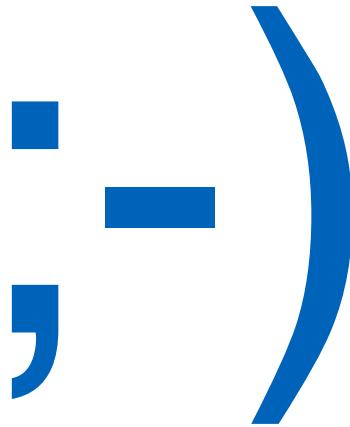
Membership organization for professionals in the plain-language field.



**PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION**

Plain Language Commission
The Castle, 29 Stoneheads, Whaley Bridge,
High Peak SK23 7BB, United Kingdom
Email: mail@clearest.co.uk
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