

# Is your writing user friendly?

Many people find reading difficult. They may prefer to get information from tape or face to face. If you have to provide written material there are ways to make it easier to understand. Imagine you are talking to your reader. Write sincerely and personally in a style that is appropriate. Always check that your meaning is clear and that the tone is not bureaucratic.

## Tips to make your writing user friendly

**Know your audience:** Think about your intended audience and its abilities and needs. This is the key to producing accessible information.

**Give relevant information:** Ask what information is relevant to your intended audience. Cut out any confusing or unnecessary detail, while making sure the essential information is very clear.

**Use plain English:** Plain language makes writing easier to understand for everyone.

**Plan what you want to say:** Present the important information in a logical sequence, one step at a time.

**Try to write as you speak:** Don't use jargon, unnecessary technical detail or abbreviations. If you need to use difficult words, include a glossary to explain them.

**Keep sentences short:** If you remember to have only one main idea per sentence this will happen naturally. See if any sentences using commas or joined with 'and' could be broken into two.

**Use simple punctuation:** Avoid semicolons, colons or hyphens, or sentences broken up with too many commas.

**Use active or personal language:** Talk to your readers directly using active and personal language. Using 'you' and 'we' makes your writing more direct and understandable.

**Be consistent:** For important concepts use the same words or phrases consistently.

# Clear Print Guidelines

## White space

- Too much dense text can put people off reading
- Columns too close together can cause confusion (some adults tend to read 'over' closely set columns)
- Short, clear chunks of text are easier to read

## Type choice and size

- Types chosen need to be clear and distinct e.g. Arial, Comic Sans, Century Schoolbook or Helvetica
- Guard against too large a type size for leaflets, this can look like children's material
- Use large print (12 – 14 point) and plenty of spacing
- If producing for partially sighted people use 16-point type. There is no benefit in using larger than 20 point
- Avoid reverse type (white on top of a colour). However, some partially sighted people find white on top of black easier to read

## Use of Capitals and lower case

- A mix of upper and lower case is easier to read than upper case only. The shape of the word helps us to read
- Over use of upper case to create emphasis is counterproductive. It is less likely that the text will be read
- Better to use bold type, bullet points or boxes to emphasise parts of the text

## Illustrations and overprinting

- Illustrations, photos or diagrams help break up the density of text, especially useful if adjacent illustrations give a clue to the text itself
- Use images such as photos, drawings or symbols to support your text. Aim to make the subject of your materials clear at a glance, even to a non-reader
- Don't put writing over the top of a photo or drawing

## **Page layout and breaks**

- Headings and new sections should come at the top of pages where possible
- Sentences and paragraphs should not run over columns or pages
- Lines between columns are helpful
- Space between lines is important. If lines are too close, the reader may drop lines, if they are too far apart the reader will not be clear whether the lines relate to each other at all
- Do not justify margins. Do not condense or stretch lines.
- Do not break up words with a hyphen at the end of the line
- Write all addresses as they appear on an envelope, not on one line separated by commas
- Use a contents list, clearly differentiated headings, rules to separate un-related sections, anything to make the layout easy to follow
- Avoid fitting text round illustrations
- On forms leave generous space to fill in details that have to be hand written, partially sighted people or people with poor motor skills tend to have larger than average handwriting

## **Paper choice and colour**

- Darker colours generally provide a more difficult background for reading, blue and purple are the worst
- Make sure there is a good contrast between type and paper, especially if using coloured paper
- Use good quality matt papers. The writing on the other side won't show through and there won't be a glare which makes writing hard to read
- Black type on white paper is the best choice for people with sight problems.
- People with dyslexia often find it easier to read type from coloured paper. Cream paper is a good alternative

## Readability

- Use clear and simple text in plain English with short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon
- *Sentences (like this one), which run for several lines, the subjects changing with the sentence itself, with several clauses (and asides included in brackets), and which are probably several sentences merged into one, are not easy for adults with reading problems.* Better to write sentences in one or two clauses, however a succession of sentences like this read like a children's story
- Use full stops rather than semi-colons
- Use bullet points or story boxes and fact boxes to make the main points clear
- Clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15-20 words. This doesn't mean making every sentence the same length. Be punchy. Vary your writing

## Choice of words

- The passive voice is often more difficult to understand e.g. **this matter will be considered shortly.** Active voice is easier to understand. **We will consider this matter shortly**
- Try to avoid grouping nouns and adjectives into large clusters e.g. Middle East hostage release negotiation drama
- Use key words (of, it, to, and, is etc.) are easy to recognise and provide a welcome relief from working out longer and more difficult words
- Use you and we. Try to call the reader you: so **you must send us,** rather than **applicants must send us. We will tell you before we...** instead of **we always tell customers before we....** Similarly call your organisation **we**
- Avoid jargon. Jargon is a type of language that is only understood by a particular group of people, such as an industry or a club
- Use numbers not words e.g. 3 instead of three

## Use simple everyday words

Use	Instead of
do	accomplish
find out	ascertain
send out/distribute	disseminate
try	endeavour
speed up	expedite
help, make easier	facilitate
work out, form	formulate
instead of	in lieu of
place	locality
greatest, most	optimum
plan	strategise
use	utilise
about	as regards
because	as a consequence
now	at the present time
about	concerning
after	following
soon	in the near future
it is clear	it is apparent
aim/goal	objective
extra	additional
tell	advise
start	commence
fill in	complete
so	consequently
prior to	before
end	terminate
if you ask	on request

## Using Technology

Important information may need to be available on audiotape or video. Keep tapes short. Always say when to turn the tape over and when it ends.

If you send e-mails, remember that formatting can be lost. This can make material harder to understand.

However, please note that Emails can be sent to a blind reader if they have access to speech software.

## Readability scores

When Microsoft Word finishes checking spelling and grammar, it can display information about the reading level of the document, including the following readability scores. Each readability score bases its rating on the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence.

To set your spell checker to automatically check readability, go to Tools, Options, Spelling, and Grammar, and then tick the Readability request. Word will then show your readability score every time you spell check.

**Flesch Reading Ease score** Rates text on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 70 to 80.

**Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score** Rates text on a U.S. grade-school level. For example, a score of 5.0 means that a fifth grader, i.e. a Year 6, average 10 year old, can understand the document. For most standard documents, aim for a score of approximately 5.0, by using short sentences, not by dumbing down vocabulary.

### Reference List:

Guide to making your writing easier for people with learning disabilities

[http://www.mencap.org.uk/html/accessibility/accessibility\\_guides.htm](http://www.mencap.org.uk/html/accessibility/accessibility_guides.htm)

guide to making your writing easier for people with dyslexia

<http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk/main/information/extras/x09frend.asp>:

All sorts of useful information about writing in plain English

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>:

site which shows you how to rate the readability of your writing

[http://www.writersservices.com/wps/s1\\_readability\\_score.htm](http://www.writersservices.com/wps/s1_readability_score.htm)

site to help you make your writing accessible for people with sight problems

[http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/code/public\\_rnib003460.hcsp](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/code/public_rnib003460.hcsp)

**If you would like an informal opinion about whether your writing is user-friendly, give Adult Literacy a ring on 01595 692839.**

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**For Advice on Access to print in alternative forms, including large print and audio, contact Freda Leask on 01595 694488.**

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RNIB and City Council

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These document has been produced by Shetland's Adult Literacy Service and Vision Service (adapted from RNIB guidelines).