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Acknowledgements Fortunately, there is a wealth of material about plain English and we have included links to some very good resources in Appendix A. We have referred to some of these resources as well as other material to create this guide and so we acknowledge the following sources: > Dianne Lee, Wordswork - Writing for Clear Communication training material > NSW Public Service Board - A Guide to Plain English, Training Pamphlet 1/64 > Arts SA Style Guide > Plain English Campaign - How to write in plain English > AskOxford.com - Better Writing - Plain English

This is one of a series of Guides developed by the Government Reform Commission to promote and support good practice in the South Australian public sector.

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Foreword



The Hon Jay Weatherill MP

Minister Assisting the Premier in Cabinet
Business and Public Sector Management

Sometimes in government people write in convoluted ways using language which hides or confuses the real message they want to convey.

Writing in plain English sends clear messages about what the government is doing or what it requires or what service is being offered. When people read government information they want to understand it the first time. Plain English gives confidence in the message being communicated. Every time we communicate clearly and simply we help to create a more positive and helpful image.

Plain English saves time and effort – for citizens, the private and community sectors and other parts of

government. Plain English will be more meaningful precisely because it says what it means and it speaks with the audience always in mind.

This guide gives lots of suggestions about writing short, straightforward sentences, avoiding jargon, using punctuation correctly and writing well-structured documents.

I strongly encourage all public sector employees to use the guide, apply the principles and review written documents against the checklist provided.

Jay Weatherill

Applying this Guide

Why do we write?

It seems easy enough to explain in a few words why we write. We write to communicate - to pass a message from the writer to the reader. So there is no point in creating documents that people do not understand. A message is not effective just because the writer understands what is meant; the writer must be sure that the reader will understand it too, and it must be acceptable to the reader. The information we prepare for public use should not confuse or frustrate. Our written documents need to be simple enough for everyone to understand.

Plain English (sometimes known as plain language) is an increasingly popular movement away from complicated communication (sometimes called gobbledygook). This movement has been gaining momentum for a long time. A lot of this guide is based on a training pamphlet published in 1964, but it is still as relevant as ever.

The basic rule for effective writing is: **Put yourself in the place of the reader.**

By writing clearly, your audience will be able to focus on the message rather than trying to pick through the style. Public servants are often accused of writing in bureaucratese and lawyers of writing legalese, but we all need to avoid **jargon**, unnecessary technical terms

and long and confusing sentences.

It's logical that if your communication is clear, more people will be able to understand it, and your readers will find your writing refreshing and powerful. Plain English saves everyone time and is essential to serving our customers well.

The principles also apply to naming and signage - say what you mean as concisely and simply as possible.

This guide is designed to help you write clearly.

We recommend that you keep this guide handy and refer to it whenever you are suffering writer's block or finding yourself using meaningless phrases. It should help you to replace bad writing habits with good habits. Use it as a checklist when reviewing documents and always before releasing information to the public.

In writing about the English language, we have had to use words that apply to **grammar** and **punctuation**. These terms are printed in **blue** through the document and defined in a glossary in Appendix C.

You should also refer to your agency's style guide for advice about using capitals, italics, **punctuation**, abbreviations, fonts and styles for numbers and dates.

Principles of Plain English

1. Choose the straightforward option

Consider the following examples.

You are advised that
Your attention is drawn to the fact that
I wish to inform you that



the brochures requested in your letter of 10 July 2007 are now available.

The expressions in the left-hand column are not 'polite' introductions to **sentences**, as many people seem to think. They are simply useless preliminaries. The information the writer wants to convey is simply

The brochures requested in your letter of 10 July 2007 are now available.

In the following examples, **the words in bold italics** add nothing to the sense of the **sentences** in which they occur.

The department will **be taking steps to** improve its level of service **over and above what it is now**.

The position is that Mr Smith's services were satisfactory.

You are advised for your information that you should call into this office **personally** to complete the form.

The brochure requested is not available at present but **it should be pointed out that** we expect to have supplies by the end of July. **In the circumstances** your name has been placed on a waiting list **in this connection**.

Consider these alternatives:

at a later date	later
collaboration together	collaborate
despite the fact that	although
follow after	follow
for a period of	for
in conjunction with	with
in connection with	about
in lieu of	instead of
in regard to	about
in the near future	soon
on two separate occasions	twice
originally created	created
with regard to	about

Avoid or minimise the following

in total of
as a matter of fact
do not hesitate to contact us
please find attached
I would like to take this opportunity
I would like to say
on a weekly basis
to be perfectly honest
last but not least
in view of the fact that
at the end of the day
at this moment in time
as far as I am concerned
each and every one
going forward

2. Keep your sentences short

An average **sentence** should contain no more than 15 to 20 words. The longer the **sentence** the harder it is to follow.

This doesn't mean counting each word, but it does mean making every word count. **Be punchy**. Mix shorter **sentences** with longer ones.

A basic rule of thumb: one idea or thought in every **sentence**. *And* is the word you have to watch.

Compare these two statements:

I understand that some nurses making house calls have been attacked in recent months on the expectation that they were carrying drugs **and** their caution when visiting certain areas in the south of the city has been very exacting **and** has even included telephoning the address to be visited, from their car, when they arrive outside the house.

I understand that some nurses making house calls have been attacked in recent months on the expectation that they were carrying drugs. Their caution when visiting certain areas in the south of the city has been very exacting. It has even included telephoning the address to be visited, from their car, when they arrive outside the house.

3. Use active voice - unless there's a good reason to use the passive.

For some reason public sector writers seem particularly prone to using the passive voice. Perhaps this is because they often write for someone else's signature and feel they might over-commit the signing officer by being too definite or too direct.

Here are some examples, with the passive version followed by the active.

Emerging artists are supported by Arts SA.
Arts SA supports emerging artists.

Your application will be considered shortly.
We will consider your application shortly.

The crime was solved by the police.
The police solved the crime.

Take special care to avoid overused phrases such as 'It is noted' and 'It is recommended'.

Sometimes the passive voice may be an appropriate option.

To make a written response less hostile - "this bill has not been paid" (passive) is softer than "you have not paid this bill" (active).

To avoid laying the blame - "a mistake was made" (passive) rather than "the administrator made a mistake" (active).

When you don't know who or what performed the action - "the committee was appointed".

But use passive voice sparingly and aim to make 80 to 90 per cent of your **sentences** active.

4. Use 'you' and 'we'

Use 'you' and 'we' to keep **sentences** short, clear and **personal**. Use 'you' when addressing the reader. Imagine you are speaking to them in **person**.

You wouldn't use 'the applicant' if the **person** was sitting across a desk from you, would you?

Here are some examples of this.

Applicants must send us ...

You must send us ...

The department always tells customers before ...

We will always tell you before...

Advice is available from...

You can get advice from...

The myth that 'I' and 'we' should be avoided in official documents has crippled many writers, causing them to adopt clumsy and confusing constructions.

If you are writing about your department it is often easier and less bureaucratic to write 'we'. And there is nothing wrong with using 'we' and 'I' in the same letter.

5. Choose words appropriate for the reader

Say what you mean and choose words that your reader will understand. This does not necessarily mean using simple words - just words that the reader will understand. One scientist talking to another will speak differently to one speaking to their child.

Jargon is language that is only understood by a particular group of people such as a profession, an industry or a club. You can use **jargon** when writing to people who will understand the terms or phrases, but avoid it with other audiences.

6. Give instructions directly

Avoid long-winded instructions and directions that confuse the reader and muddle the message.

Please be advised that late applications will not be accepted under any circumstances.

We will not accept late applications.

There always seems to be a fear of commands. The most common fault is saying 'customers should do this' instead of just 'do this'. For example:

Passengers are advised not to leave their baggage unattended.

Please do not leave your bags unattended.

7. Be positive

Always try to emphasise the positive side of things. Even consequences can be presented in a pleasant manner when you arrange **sentences** in a positive way.

For example:

If you don't send your payment, we won't be able to renew your licence. (negative)

Please send your payment so we can renew your licence. (positive)

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