



Attorney General's Office

Writing Style Guide

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Checklist – the six elements of good writing

1. Know your audience

Think about your subject from your reader's point of view. Consider your reader's workload, motivation and understanding.

2. Focus on the purpose

Be clear about what you want to achieve from your writing. Aim to sum up your reason for writing in a single sentence.

3. Plan a logical structure

List the points you want to make, then organise them into a clear structure. Do this with your audience and purpose in mind.

4. Write clearly, using clear English

Use everyday words and avoid using jargon, technical law terms and if you must use Latin, remember to write the English translation in brackets next to it. Keep sentences short and active. Be specific. Break up text with sub-headings.

5. Find the right tone of voice

That is open, positive, human and polite.

6. Edit and proofread

Read it out loud and edit until you're satisfied. Get someone who is unfamiliar with the subject to do the final edit and proofread.

1. Know your audience

Before you start writing, think about what your reader needs and the questions they'll have. Whether you're writing for colleagues, ministers or an external audience, think about the subject from their point of view. A useful tip is to think of someone you know and write as if you're talking to them. It will sound much more natural.

Put yourself in the shoes of your reader and consider practical questions like workload, motivation and understanding. Ask yourself:

- How much time does my reader have for this?
- How can I make them want to read it?
- Will they understand legal terms and abbreviations?

2. Focus on your purpose

Be clear about this. Are you writing to inform, educate or persuade? What do you want to say? You must clearly understand what you want to say before you start writing.

Can you sum up your reason for writing in a single sentence? Use this sentence to help explain to readers what you're writing about at the beginning – this should be one of the first things you say.

3. Plan a logical structure

Spend time planning before you start and you'll save time later on. It will give you the confidence to decide what you can leave out. Organising your information in a logical order helps your writing to flow and keeps you focused on the purpose. If you have a lot of material, a clear and coherent structure will help your reader engage more easily.

4. Write clearly, using clear English

- **Use clear English.** Don't use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. Use everyday words that are used in conversation. Use 'buy' instead of 'purchase', 'help' instead of 'assist', 'about' instead of 'approximately' and 'like' instead of 'such as'. Remember you are trying to engage, rather than impress, your readers.
- **Avoid using jargon.** Our audiences lose trust in us if we use government 'buzzwords', legal language and jargon that they find difficult to understand. If you need to introduce a legal term, make sure you explain it first, in clear English. The first time you use an abbreviation or acronym, explain it in full. If you are writing a long document, consider adding a glossary of terms.
- **Be concise.** Leave out any unnecessary information. Keep sentences and paragraphs short. An average of 15 to 20 words per sentence is ideal.
- **Make your sentences active rather than passive.** Active sentences give your writing energy and clarity. They're quicker and easier to read and are more memorable. In active sentences the subject (the person or thing that is doing something) comes in front of the verb. You say *who* is doing *what*: "the Attorney General gave a speech" (active) not "a speech was given by the Attorney General" (passive).
- **Be open and specific.** Don't use words that are too general and vague (see the list of words to avoid on page 7), as this can lead to misinterpretation or empty, meaningless text.
- **Use direct language when you're giving instructions.** Commands will get your message across faster e.g. "follow these steps" and "read this information carefully". If you need to soften the tone of your instruction, say "please".
- **Use verbs.** Try not to turn verbs ("doing" words) into nouns. For example, say: "We will discuss this later", not "We will have a discussion about this later". Using too many nouns will make sentences longer and more complicated than they need to be.
- **Use sub-headings.** These are a good way of breaking up text into easy-to-manage chunks and they help you organise the points you want to make in a logical way.

5. Find the right tone of voice

When we speak, our tone of voice communicates a mood that adds meaning to the words we say. The tone we use will depend on our audience, purpose and subject matter. The department's tone is always open, positive, human and polite.

Use positive words. Even if your message is a tough one, you can express it in a balanced and open way that takes account of your reader as a person.

Positive language tells the reader what is possible, is helpful (e.g. "can", "will", "do"), sympathetic and polite, and apologises where necessary.

Negative language implies the reader is at fault, doesn't suggest alternatives, expresses no sympathy, and may sound aggressive (e.g. "not possible", "does not have").

6. Edit and proofread

Allow plenty of time for proper editing and proofreading after you've completed your first draft.

Editing and proofreading tips:

- When editing, read your work out loud. Does it sound natural? Can you read whole sentences without running out of breath? This is a good way of checking whether sentences are too long, repetitive or full of jargon.
- Cut out any words you don't need. For maximum impact, use a minimum of words.
- Proofread from paper copies. On average you'll find 15 per cent more mistakes than when reading from a screen.
- Use a ruler under each line as you proofread. This will force you to slow down and read one word at a time.
- Find quiet time and space to proofread properly. Don't treat it as an add-on.
- Tell yourself you want to find mistakes. You'll be more likely to find them.
- Ask someone who hasn't been involved in drafting to check for mistakes.

Words to avoid using with an external audience

In most cases, we can do without these words:

agenda (unless it is for a meeting)

advancing

collaborate (use 'working with')

combating

commit or pledge (be more specific – we're either doing something or we're not)

countering

deliver

deploy

dialogue (we speak to people)

empower

facilitate (instead, say something specific about how you are helping)

focusing

foster (unless it is children)

(to) impact (on) (as a verb)

incentivise (and disincentivise)

initiate

key (unless it unlocks something – it is probably 'important')

(to) land (as a verb)

leverage (unless in the financial sense)

liaise

overarching

(to) progress (as a verb – what are we actually doing?)

promote (unless you are talking about an ad campaign)

robust

slimming down

streamline

strengthening

tackling

transforming (what are we actually doing to change it?)

utilise

Writing for different channels

Writing for the web

We don't read from the screen in the same way as we read printed documents. Your web writing should reflect this. When reading on screen we:

- read more slowly – about 25 per cent more slowly
- scan the page instead of reading the whole document
- want specific information – and fast
- dip in and out of pages and sections of pages, a bit like reading a magazine
- don't read left to right or top to bottom (it's more like the letter Z on screen)

Think about what your web user needs.

- Summarise content in plenty of clear headlines and subheadings – it helps users find what they're looking for.
- Put your most important point first and least important last – web users probably won't read to the end.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs really short, with no more than one point in each paragraph.
- Use links sparingly or separate them from the text.
- Use images to help convey your message

GOV.UK

If you are writing content for the health pages of Gov.uk please follow the Gov.uk style guide (www.gov.uk/designprinciples/styleguide)

Social media

Social media is informal, personal and direct. We use a simpler, more informal language style on our social media channels (Facebook, Twitter etc.) than in other departmental communications.

Writing emails

Take the same care with emails as you would for any other public communication. Emails aren't necessarily secure, and always remember **they are covered by the Freedom of Information Act.**

Be friendly. Be short. Learn to summarise.

Know your purpose. State it briefly in the subject line.

Be professional. Follow normal rules for spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Be polite. It's more difficult to judge someone's tone from an email. Don't forget your manners in your hurry to send.

Make it clear who you are sending it to (put them in the 'To' box and only CC in people who need to know)

Don't copy people in unnecessarily.