Plain English Guide

ISLE *of*
WIGHT
C O U N C I L

Introduction

It may seem obvious to state that the simpler the words we use the easier we are to understand, but in most circumstances this is the case.

For many reasons, and often without thinking, we sometimes use less familiar words and more words than are necessary, and both at the expense of clarity.

Sometimes our choice of language is specific to our audience. We may use technical language when speaking to or writing for a group of experts, or simpler language for a very young audience.

Whichever audience we are trying to communicate with, the key must be to apply our choice of language to their level of understanding.

Quite simply, if they don't understand us, we are failing as a communicator.

This can apply to council publications (internal and external), press releases, committee reports, correspondence and other forms of written communication.
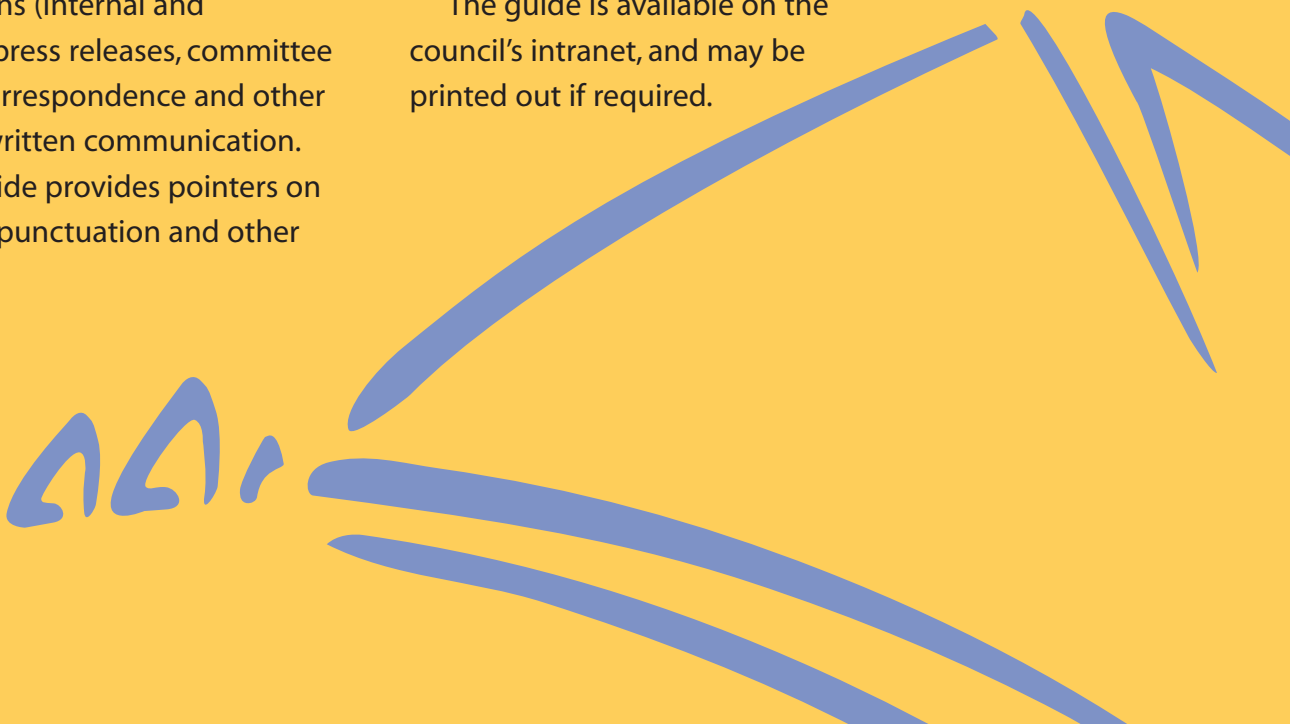
This guide provides pointers on word use, punctuation and other style devices to help our written material become easier to read and understand.

Most of the style pointers are tried and tested and drawn from a variety of sources, including style books used by other local authorities, and the experience of staff within the council's communications section, who have worked on a wide variety of publications (subject to various house styles).

The guide has been finalised following detailed discussions on its contents and relevance to the council and those we serve. The discussions have involved council staff with experience in this field and representatives of outside communication groups such as the *Isle of Wight County Press*. It is not comprehensive and will be updated as other items for consideration arise.

The guide is available on the council's intranet, and may be printed out if required.

Contents

ISLE
WIGH

Why do we need a style guide?

Councils are mainly judged on the quality and cost of the services they provide.

The way these services are viewed is not helped if councils are also considered remote, bureaucratic and unresponsive, and perhaps more intent on withholding information than giving it out.

On occasions councils are even judged on services they don't provide, simply because people are not always clear about what they do.

The way we communicate and the effectiveness of our communications have a marked influence on how we are viewed and people's understanding of what our duties are.

Effective communication can vary from the speed and manner with which we answer the phone, to the styles we use in our written material.

If our communications are too formal and bureaucratic, then people may think that is how we go about our business. If the language we use is confusing or full of jargon, people may think we have something to hide or we simply don't care.

Plain English can help to portray a positive image of the Isle of Wight Council.

Clear, accurate and concise language can help to reduce misunderstandings. That may even mean fewer phone calls from people complaining or seeking explanation.

Plain English is not about talking down to people or being patronising. It simply means choosing straightforward language that is appropriate.

If we all strive to adopt the principles of plain English, then we will be doing ourselves and our customers a real service.

Areas not covered by this guide

Certain uses of language are outside the remit of this guide for a variety of reasons. They are:

- **Legal English** – The wording of legal documents and terms has to be unambiguous, precise and comprehensive. For this reason, legal clarity and accuracy take precedence over plain English in the construction of such documents. It can help however, when communicating with people who don't have a legal background, to provide an additional plain English explanation of legal wording which may appear confusing.

- **Expert to expert** – When experts are writing for other experts on issues they mutually understand, the use of language outside the plain English guidelines is often acceptable.
- **Departmental shorthand** – This is a variation on the theme of experts writing for their fellow experts. It can occur within government departments or organisations where certain language and its use is widely understood.
- **The spoken word** – The spoken word can be very different in its phrasing or use from the written word. Remember, what is effective or allowable in one may not be in the other.

Written communications

Many devices and approaches can be used to make written material easier to read and understand. It is important we recognise how our choice of words, punctuation and other style formats can help to improve readability and understanding.

The simple message about written material is if it is difficult to read and understand its effectiveness may well be diminished.

One general approach to presenting material in a readable and understandable way is to imagine it is being read out aloud by a newsreader. But this can run the risk of being patronising.

Try to steer clear of *council speak*, unless the circumstances or target audience specifically demand that approach.

Jargon, officialese and acronyms are often overused or used inappropriately, and can confuse a reader. They may even give the impression you are attempting to disguise something.

If we wish to engage with the public effectively, we should remember there is a need for us to be aware of, and to adapt to, the evolving nature of language. But we should also try to maintain good habits of style and grammar.

It is often about achieving a balance, evolving and adapting to changing approaches, while retaining effective readability and clarity of understanding.

Publications and press releases

Publications

Publications produced by the council are a key way of communicating with many different audiences. These can range from leaflets on highways, heritage or social services matters to the council's *Wight Insight* magazine.

It is important the information in these publications is interesting and easy to understand.

To help ensure this, the council has a publications unit with experienced writers familiar with plain English and other style devices.

These styles are applied to all publications produced by the unit, and a plain English service is available to other council areas that may wish to have their publications checked.

Press releases

Press releases are one of the written methods used by the council to provide information to the media.

To ensure consistency and a professional approach to media relations, it is the council's policy for all press releases to be written or checked and authorised by its communications unit.

When media organisations receive a press release, they usually adapt the information in the release to suit their own publishing or broadcasting style.

Some media organisations will require more

details than others. The purpose of the release is to provide the relevant and key facts concerning the subject matter, and if appropriate, supporting quotes from a relevant council officer and/or portfolio holder. Contact details are also provided for further information or clarification to be obtained.

The use of plain English and consistent styles make a press release easier to understand. Journalists working for media organisations themselves use similar styles in writing reports for publication or broadcasting.

Poorly laid-out, badly-written and confusing press releases can alienate the recipient and also run the risk of inaccurate information being published or broadcast.

Eagle-eyed journalists may also be on the lookout for writing clangers in press releases (just as much as in council reports and publications).

It is just as important therefore that press releases adopt the same consistent styles as other council written material.

Reports

Council reports are written for a variety of audiences, and may be for confidential internal viewing or available externally to the public and other organisations, including the media.

Sometimes for specialist audiences it is necessary to choose words and phrases of a technical nature in such reports. On the whole though, the plain English rules of consistency of style, conciseness and clarity should apply.

It should be remembered there is always the risk, however remote, of officers or councillors acting upon information that is confusing or misleading, due to the way a report has been written. A report may also waste time and money by being deferred or delayed to clarify text which is confusing.

By adopting plain English and style pointers outlined in this guide, you should find it easier to achieve less wordy and more easily understandable reports.

Letters

Most of us (as members of the public) will have received official letters we consider confusing, inaccurate and even rude.

Sometimes their contents may make us so angry that our response can be irrational and unhelpful.

Once we calm down we may find ourselves thinking, if only the letter had been polite, clear and relevant, perhaps I wouldn't be so upset.

Standard official letters churned out automatically are often the worst culprits for generating this response, and the situation can worsen when you find it impossible to speak to the author to complain.

A simple guide when writing an official letter is to consider for a moment how you would feel if you received the letter, putting yourself in the recipient's shoes.

Certainly, abrupt letters with stark messages are often specifically designed to scare people into acting quickly, but they can also just as easily result in people digging their heels in, and thus drag out and inflame a situation.

If a letter annoys the recipient then it may also alienate them.

Remember, a firm message can be just as effective if delivered politely, while clearly stating the possible consequences.

In short, the best way to communicate positively by letter is through courtesy, clarity and ensuring your facts are correct and relevant.

Writing letters in plain English

Here are some helpful tips on letter writing in line with plain English styles.

Image

Your letters should be helpful, polite and as friendly as the subject allows.

Style

Use the pre-designed Isle of Wight Council templates.

- Make sure all your contact details are correct.
- Use the *align left* format for margins.
- Use single spacing.
- Dates – use day, month and then year. Do not punctuate or use *rd, th, st, nd*.
  So the style should be: 18 December, 2003.
- Use open punctuation for addresses. This means not using commas and full stops, as shown below.

  Mr Peter Evans
  1 The Road
  Crawley
  RH10 1XY

  You should punctuate if the address runs on a continuous line eg Mr Peter Evans, 1 The Road, Crawley, RH10 1XY.
- Use bold or italics to emphasise points rather than capital letters as these can be perceived as threatening and interrupt the reader's flow.

Greetings

If you know the name of the person you're writing to, use eg Dear Mr Smith.

If you don't know their name use Dear Sir or Dear Madam.

If you don't know their gender use Dear Sir/Madam.

If a woman has signed her letter 'Jane Smith' but has not indicated a preferred title use 'Dear Jane Smith'.

Endings

If you start your letter Dear Mr (name) then you should end Yours sincerely. If you use any other greeting you should end Yours faithfully.

Reader's shoes

Remember, you need to think how the recipient would feel, putting yourself in their shoes. Try to consider:

- what effect you want your letter to have;
- who you are writing to (audience);
- why you are writing;
- the order of information.

Don't forget that sending bad news will affect the recipient. Will they feel that you care? Will they feel that you tried to help? If not, you could have an additional problem from their reaction.

Organise your letter

Try to write a well ordered and structured letter. Perhaps consider it as having a beginning, a middle and an end.

- *The beginning*
  This simply makes contact eg 'Thank you for your letter…' or 'You will remember that we spoke at the meeting about...' This can set the tone and is crucial to making the recipient more receptive to any subsequent information.

  The beginning of your letter should establish common ground – the reason for the letter.

  If you need to apologise do it early on but be mindful of the legal implications. An apology can be taken as liability. If in doubt, ask. You may even wish to refer to the council's legal section.

  Don't agonise over a good beginning, If you can't think how to start the letter write the middle first. A suitable beginning will probably come to you as you write.

- *The middle*
  This is where you send your message. It is the business part. 'This is what I would like from you...' or 'this is what I have done…'
    Think about the sequence of facts and statements. Make them logical and easy to follow.

- *The end*
  This simply ties it all up. It should not be a summary unless the letter is very long. Simply write 'please ring me if you have any questions', or you might want to end with a phrase which will make the reader feel good like, 'I've enjoyed working with you'.

A final check
Your hard work in getting the message right can easily be undone. Typing mistakes and poor layout (remember to use the template) will detract from your message. Sometimes it helps to ask a colleague to check your letter before you send it out.

Emails

The council has existing policies on email communication, which can be found on the intranet under the Staff section (then click on handbook and scroll the handbook contents to find the appropriate sub-heading).

All members of staff should have read and signed up to the email *acceptable use* policies. Copies are also available from Human Resources.

Style guidelines

This section includes a selection of plain English style devices that should help make your written material easier to read and more understandable.

Plainer words

A common criticism of councils is that we often use longer words than are needed, almost as if we use different languages to speak and write.

Here are some examples:

endeavour [try]
termination [end]
discontinue [stop]
numerous [many]
despatch [send]
ascertain [find out]

Try to use shorter words if you can.

Shorter sentences

Plain English encourages the use of shorter, clearer sentences. But it should be noted that their overuse can sometimes give a stop-start or disjointed feel to text. Also important in plain English and understanding written material is the choice and flow of words.

Avoiding jargon

We all use jargon and our own technical terms on a daily basis. The problem arises when other people don't understand these terms.

We should remember to use words and phrases we believe our reader will understand.

If we have to use words which we believe the reader may not understand then we should make sure we explain their meaning.

For example, sets of initials or acronyms can be confusing. Some, like the BBC or ITV have passed into common usage, but others need explanation the first time you use them.

The Isle of Wight County Press has kindly provided us with some words and phrases from its jargon-buster list, which its journalists are advised to avoid, so as not to confuse readers. Here is a selection, many of which may be familiar to those in local government.

Disengage
Empower
Facilitated
Holistic approach
Joined up thinking
Looked after children
Multi-tasking

One stop shop
Out-sourced
Pump-prime
Risk assessment
Rolled out
Seed corn projects
Upskilling

Avoiding abstract language

Many of us have probably heard business-speak expressions in recent years such as *blue sky opportunities* or *thinking outside the box*. But do we really understand what they mean? Some people may use them without really thinking, and others to appear trendy.

Like jargon, abstract language is ineffective if its meaning confuses. Stick to language your audience will understand.

Grammar

English grammar and its use can provoke strong emotions. Some people may be rigid about its implementation while others may prefer a more flexible approach.

If you were taught how to analyse a sentence then you may not give ground on split infinitives or ending a sentence with a preposition.

On the other hand, if your education had a different emphasis then you may be among those who couldn't spot an infinitive or care less if it was split.

But grammar is important. In general, plain English should help you avoid complex sentences that most often contain grammatical errors.

Starting a sentence with *and, because* and *but*

Because these are joining words or conjunctions, the convention used to be that you shouldn't start a sentence with them.

If your sentences are short, it is useful to join ideas in separate sentences. *And* it can be effective.

Used properly it can help to give emphasis to your message. *But* if you don't like starting a sentence with a conjunction, you don't have to.

Split infinitives

Splitting the infinitive means placing a word between the 'to' and the verb such as 'to quickly write'.

Captain Kirk's phrase 'to boldly go' is one of the best known examples.

Many people think it is a mistake to split an infinitive, although a lot of modern writers regard it as a matter of style. To adhere strictly to the rule can make sentences sound too formal and even clumsy.

Ending a sentence with a preposition

Prepositions are words like *with, up, at, to* and *on*. The established convention says they should never be used at the end of a sentence. But to apply this strictly can make your text very formal.

Winston Churchill's response was:*"This is one rule up with which I will not put."*

Figures

- Numbers *one* to *ten* are spelt out, *11* and above in figures.

  The exception is when a sentence starts with a number, in which case the number should always be spelt out. For example: "*Fifty* per cent of Isle of Wight residents…", or "*Sixteen* protest marchers…" If using figures in tables or certain lists, then *1* to *10* may be used.

- Ordinals *first* to *tenth* are spelt out, *11ᵗʰ* and above in figures.

  Numbers with four figures and above take commas: *3,500* not 3500, and *£2,000* not £2000. If using ordinals in tables or certain lists, then *1ˢᵗ* to *10ᵗʰ* may be used.

- Years are an exception to the comma in four figures rule, for example: 2500 BC.

- Dates are written in the format *20 January, 2002* - not January 20 2002, 20ᵗʰ January 2002, or January 20ᵗʰ 2002.

- When writing times of day avoid using the 24 hour clock, which may appear too formal or even military in nature (unless of course circumstances mean it is particularly appropriate, in some timetables, for example). So in most cases use 10am or 5.30pm (note, open punctuation used, so not 10 a.m. or 5.30 p.m.) instead of 10.00 hrs or 17.30 hrs. Also avoid 10.00am, 10am will do.

- Fractions from *one half* through to *nine tenths* should be spelt out, but from *1/11* onwards adopt figures. If using figures in tables or certain lists, then *1/2* through to *9/10* is acceptable.

- The word *per cent* should be written as two words, and not as percent or %. The exception is if in tables, where the symbol may be used.

- Telephone numbers should adopt the following approach, split into two chunks (effectively code and number), *01983 821000*, not 01983 821 000. For mobiles the approach should be *07710 654321*, two chunks again.

  If you want to indicate the number sequence is a telephone number then precede it with *tel:* if the sentence structure permits. You may also use *ext:* instead of extension. These two forms of abbreviation are now felt to be in sufficiently wide use to be acceptable and understandable.

  Avoid splitting telephone numbers over two lines of text, also figures such as *£3 million*, otherwise their meaning may be compromised.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

- For months of the year use *January*, not Jan, unless in a table or listing where space is tight.

- Ampersands (&) should not be used in body text or headlines, unless the ampersand has been adopted as part of a title, for example Marks & Spencer. Ampersands may be used where space is tight in tables or listings.

- Avoid using a dash or hyphen to replace the word *to*, such as 8am-8pm. It should be 8am *to* 8pm. Again if space is tight, or tables are used, the dash or hyphen may be used, but the style must be consistent throughout the table/item.

- Acronyms must be explained in full at their first use in any item, for example "the Standing Conference on Problems Associated with the Coastline (Scopac)". Then in further uses in the same article just use Scopac. Also note, you needn't use capitals throughout for acronyms such as Scopac (or Unicef, Nato, etc) which form a word of sorts, even though meaningless. Acronyms with non-word forming capitals, such as RSPB, NBC, CBS, must be written entirely in capitals, and also short acronyms such as IT.
  Use open punctuation for all acronyms, ABC not A.B.C.
  On rare occasions, acronyms may be written without explanation, if it is felt they are universally understood, such as RSPCA, BBC, etc.

- When writing *and/or* do not leave a gap between the letters and the slash, and / or is incorrect.

- If using measurements, such as 100 kilometres or 20 millilitres, write out in full, unless showing a conversion in brackets, such as 218 miles (349km). Also when following a figure with abbreviated measurements then do not leave a gap in between, using (110ml) or 10pm, not (100 ml) or 10 pm.

- The use of etc to shorten a list is acceptable, but avoid its use if there is already a word preceding the list that indicates it is incomplete.

- It is now acceptable to use *email*, instead of *e-mail* (as it saves space and is in common use).

Punctuation

Punctuation is there to help the reader make sense of your writing. It is important to get it right. When you talk the listener is helped by the pauses, tone and emphasis you give. In writing, punctuation performs the same task.

- Keep it simple and uncluttered.

- Correct use of **apostrophes** is important. Remember they are either used to indicate possession (singular or plural) or to take the place of a certain letter in abbreviations.
  Where possessive they will indicate either a singular possession, *the council's headquarters*, or a plural possession, *the ramblers' headquarters*. If a word is already plural in its meaning, such as children or people, then the apostrophe comes before the *s*, for example, *the children's toys* and *the people's hopes*.
  Apostrophes are often incorrectly left out when plural units of measure are used in a

possessive sense. The correct approach is, for example, *one week's holiday* or *two weeks' holiday*. Alternatively you can remove the possessive requirement by saying *a holiday of two weeks*.

When used to shorten or abbreviate, the apostrophe replaces a letter. For example *has not* becomes *hasn't*. Try to avoid such use, unless relevant to the potential readers, as it can indicate sloppiness and over-familiarity. Also, avoid the common apostrophe error with the words *it is*. Remember, an apostrophe can only be used with these words when it replaces the *i* of is, so *it is* is shortened to *it's*. It has no possessive use, so *on its own,* has no apostrophe, for example.

Also, there is often no need for apostrophes with certain acronyms such as MPs (not MP's) or CVs (not CV's). The exception is if it is to differentiate between singular and plural possession, for example *the MP's briefcase*, or the *MPs' collective viewpoint*.

When indicating periods of time such as decades, there is also usually no need for apostrophes, so the *1960s* is fine, but not the *1960's*, unless indicating possession.

- **Commas** (,) should be used sparingly. There are two reasons for using a comma. Firstly, where there is a natural pause in the sentence. Secondly, where something extra is added in, such as a subsidiary clause within a sentence.

- **Semi colons** (;) are used where you need a strong pause within the sentence but not a stop.

- **Colons** (:) are used where you need a pause stronger than a semi-colon but weaker than a full stop. It is also used to show a relationship between two ideas in the same sentence.
  For example: Margaret's career was taking off: Peter's was in decline.
  It can also be used to introduce lists.

- **Exclamation marks** (!) may be used as a short expression of surprise, shock or anger, for example, *Wow!* Only single exclamation marks should be used, and the use of this form of punctuation should be sparing.

- **Quotation marks**. The most commonly used style is double quotes ("), except in headings or headlines when single quotes (') are preferred. Single quotes should also be used to indicate a quote within a quote.
  Sometimes you see quote marks put around a word or phrase for emphasis. Try to avoid this, and instead use *italics* or **bolder** type for emphasis.

- **Hyphenation** is becoming less and less common in modern printed English. New editions of some dictionaries are now not hyphenating many words they did in the past, such as *worldwide*, *eyesight* and *email*.
  Where there is a choice of hyphenating or not (say in conflicting dictionaries), the non-hyphenated version should be used.
  Hyphenation as a way of splitting a word across two lines is sometimes used as a space saver, usually by utilising an automatic hyphenation option on your computer when justifying text.

Using lists and bullet points

Lists can be used to break down complex information into manageable pieces.

Lists usually have two main parts:

- an introductory heading or sentence, followed by a colon (:);
- the separate points, often indicated by a bullet point (•).

When you are writing a document and the words following the bullet point form a sentence when read with the introduction:

- end each section with a semi-colon;
- start the sections with a lower case letter;
- finish the final section with a full stop.

When you are writing a document and the words following the bullet point form a complete sentence, then each section needs a full stop, and should begin with a capital letter.

In display material such as posters, charts and information panels, you can keep things simple, and in your lists leave out the punctuation at the end of a section, making the message uncluttered.

You may use numbers, letters, dashes or simple indents instead of bullet points, where suitable.

Remember, your lists should be consistent in style so that they have the maximum impact.

Titles and use of capitals

- The council and its departments should be referred to in the singular. For example:"The Isle of Wight Council *is* introducing…"

- Even though it conflicts with the singular style, you may occasionally and where appropriate use the word *we* to represent the council, as it softens the formal approach of using too many *councils* and *its* in any passage. For example:"We are working with local people."

- When mentioning the Isle of Wight Council, using its full title, it is proper to use capitals at the start of each word. Subsequent uses of the word *council* should begin in lower case, unless the full title is repeated.

- When referring to council departments, if using their full title for the first time in an article, cap up the first letters, for example *Social Services Directorate*. Subsequent mentions should be lower case, for example *social services directorate*.

- Job or positional titles should use the lower case approach, for example *chief executive* or *leader of the council*. Exceptions would be a full title such as *Mayor of Medina Fred Bloggs* or *High Sheriff Freda Bloggs*, although subsequent uses would refer to the *mayor* (lower case) or the *high sheriff*. Certain titles of major national importance, such as the Queen, will always adopt capitals.

- Use open punctuation for titles such as Mr, Dr, St, etc, avoid the older more cluttered style of Mr., Dr., etc.

- When referring to someone with their job title

- use their name and title, but avoid any prefix unless it is a distinct professional qualification such as Dr. For example: Dr Stanley Unwin, communications manager.

- When writing the name of a publication or film or theatre production, try to put the title in italics, such as, "The Isle of Wight Council's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.*"

- When writing headings and sub-headings, try to avoid blocks of capitals, such as THIS HEADING IS A STRAIN ON THE EYES. Block capitals can also be perceived as being aggressive.

  Lower case lettering is commonly accepted as being easier to read, so in headings also avoid capitals at the start of a word, except for the first word, or titles that should have capitals.

  So opt for **Coppins Bridge to feature in new Matrix movie**, rather than **Coppins Bridge To Feature in New Matrix Movie**.

- Straplines, standfirsts, captions and pull quotes used in publications generally do not need a full stop at the end.

  A *strapline* may be a simple message that needs emphasis in bold type or using some other device and is often seen across the top or bottom of a page, for example, **Improving Island life**

  A *standfirst* is usually a lead-in sentence or paragraph to a written item that is given extra emphasis in terms of type size, font, boldness or positioning. It tends to whet the reader's appetite and give a flavour of the item.

  Captions are usually sentences explaining a photograph or image included with an article.

  Pull quotes are when a quote or part of a quote is taken from a passage of text and repeated in a headline or sub-heading (usually above the section containing the quote), such as: **'This was their finest hour'**

Spellings, style options and confused words and phrases

Here is a selection of some words that are often misused or wrongly spelt. A fuller list is available at the publications unit at County Hall (tel: 823105).

There are also many words that vary in spelling in British English and American English. This is worth considering if you have an American English spellchecker on your computer.

Try to/try and

One of the most common mistakes in English, which has transferred from the spoken language into the written language, is the incorrect use of the word *and* instead of the word *to*.

A common example is writing *to try and* do something when *to try to* do is correct in most cases. There are exceptions to this, such as *to try and try again*, and such is the widespread misuse of *to try and*, that many people would not even notice the error. Some dictionaries even say it is an acceptable alternative *to try to*.

But as a good habit when writing, we should *try to use the correct words* rather than *try and use the correct words*.

Inquiry/enquiry

Another classic misconception is that the words *inquiry* and *enquiry* have slightly different meanings and applications. They are simply two similarly spelt words with exactly the same meanings.

Among/while

It is now a commonly accepted style device to replace the use of *amongst* and *whilst* with *among* and *while*, where appropriate.

Affect/effect

Generally, affect is the verb and effect is the noun. So *you have to affect something to create an effect*.

Compliment/complement

A *compliment* is an expression of regard or praise. *Complement* means to fill up, make whole, or add in a way that improves.

So:

She selected a green sweater to *complement* her blonde hair.

He *complimented* her on her appearance.

When using the adjectives:

complementary medicine (additional medicine that may be used with scientific medicine);

complimentary ticket (a ticket given free of charge).

Focused/targeted

Use focused/targeted, not focussed or targetted.

Forums/consortiums

Many Greek and Latin words are parts of the English language, and in some cases the established English use of some of these words is now deemed correct.

Most dictionaries now accept *forums* and *consortiums* as the plural version of forum and consortium, rather than *fora* and *consortia*.

Some words, such as *data* and *millennia*, however, should be used in their original plural form.

Headteacher

Headteacher is now accepted for use as one word.

Practice/practise

Practice is the noun, whereas *practise* (the verb) is what you do at practice.

Principle/principal

A *principle* is a concept, truth, rule or ideal on which actions and behaviour are based, such as *we have agreed in principle*.

Principal means chief or most important, such as *the college principal* or *a principal source of income*.

Choosing the right words

Think who you are writing for or to

We all know that language is constantly changing – every new edition of a dictionary has a range of new words, some old ones may disappear and others may change their meaning.

It is important we try to keep up to date with these changes – particularly when writing to or for the public.

We should also remember that some sections of the population may not be using the latest words or phrases, perhaps for age, background or other reasons.

A simple guideline in choosing the right words is to think who you are writing for, but try not to close your mind to the evolving nature of language.

Be sensitive to different audiences

When acting on behalf of the council we should be careful not to offend or alienate people by the language we use.

This is not always going to be possible as sometimes there are conflicting views about what individuals find offensive.

Equality and diversity training, and our own personal experiences will have taught us what is generally acceptable and what may offend, but we should be aware that even within minority groups, what is an unacceptable term for one individual may be favoured by another.

The best policy here is to be responsive to people's views and feelings and to be open to changing your own language.

If we do cause offence it may be unintentional and a simple case of just not knowing the right way of expressing something or being a bit out of date with our language.

Don't forget you can always ask people how they would like to be addressed if you are not sure.

It is also important to know that jargon or bureaucratic language can be confusing at the best of times, let alone for those who may not have English as their first language.

Index of alternative words

To make written material easier to read and understand it helps to use simpler and shorter words if possible and appropriate.

This is because some words or combinations of words can obscure messages and confuse the reader.

Here are some options:

A

absence of	no, none
accede to	grant, allow, agree
access	be more specific (open/understand/visit)
accommodate	try to help, reflect, fit
accommodation	where you live, home
accompanying	with
accomplish	do
in accordance with	agrees, follows
accordingly	so
according to our records	our records show
acquaint yourself	find out
acquire	buy
acknowledge	thank you
additional	extra, more
adjacent	next to
adjustments	changes
admissible	allowed
advantageous	useful, helpful
advise	tell, say
affected	changed
aggregate	total
a large number of	many
albeit	even if

alleviate	ease, reduce, cut, lift
allocate	give, divide, share
alternatively	choice, other
anticipate	expect
apparent	clear, plain, obvious
applicant	you
appreciable	large, great
appraise	inform, tell
appropriately	proper, right, suitable
appropriate to	which applies to
approximate	about, roughly
as a means of	to
ascertain	find out
as prescribed by	under
assist, assistance	help
at an early date	soon
at present	now
attempt	try
attend	come to, go to
at this moment in time	now
authorise	allow, let
authority	right, power

B

be deficient in	lacks, need, want
be responsible for	handle, deal with
belated	late
beneficial	useful, helpful, good
benefit	help
by means of	by, with

construct	build, make
consult	talk to, see, meet, ask about
contain	has
continue	keep on
contribute	give
creditor	lender
cumulative	add up, added up
customary	usual

C

capability	ability
category	group, class
cease	finish, stop, end
Christian name	first name, forename
close proximity	near
combined	joint
commence	start, begin
commensurate	equal to
comply with	follow
compared with	than
component	part
comprise	make up, form, include
compulsory	must
conceal	hide
concerning	about, on
conclude	finish, close, end
concur	agree
condition	rule, state
confront	face
in connection with	about
consecutive	following on, next to
as a consequence of	because, due to
consequently	so
consider	think
considerably	a lot
consisted of	was, had
constitute	make up, is

D

deduct	take off
deem	treat as
defer	put off delay
deficiency	lack of
delete	cross out
demonstrate	show, prove
denote	show
despatch	send
designate	appoint, choose
desire	wish
determination	decision
diminish	drop, lessen, reduce
disseminate	spread
disburse	pay
disclose	tell, show
discontinue	stop, end
document	papers
dominant	main
due to the fact that	because, as
duration	time
dwelling, domicile	home, house, flat

E

elect	choose, pick
eligible	allowed, qualify
enable	allow, let
enclosed	inside, with, here is
endeavour	try
enquire	question
enquiry	question
ensure	make sure
entitlement	right
equivalent	equal, the same
erroneous	wrong
establish	show, find out
evaluate	test, check
evince	show, display
exceptionally	only, when
excessive	too many, too much
exclude	leave out
excluding	apart from, other than
exclusively	only
exempt from	free from
expedite	hurry
expeditiously	as soon as possible
expenditure	spending
extant	current, in force

F

facilitate	help, ease
factor	reason
failure to	if you do not
following	after
for the duration of	during, while
for the purpose of	to
forward	send
forthwith	now, at once
frequent	often
furnish	give
furthermore	then, also

G

generate	produce, give
guidance	help

H

have a responsibility to	must
have a requirement for	need
henceforth	from now on
hereby	avoid this word
herein	avoid this word
heretofore	until now
herewith	avoid this word
hitherto	until now

I

illustrate	show
immediately	at once
implement	carry out, do
in accordance with	as, under
in addition to	also
in advance	before
in case of	if
inception	start
in conjunction with	and, with
in connection with	for, about
in consequence	because, as
indicate	show
individuals	people
in excess of	more than
inform	tell
initiate	begin, start
in lieu of	instead of
in order that	so that
in order to	to
in receipt of	have

in relation to	about
in respect of	about, for
in accordance with	agrees
in such a way that	so
in the absence of	without
in the case of	in, for
in the course of	in, while, during
in the event of	if
irrespective of	whether or not, even if
issue	give, send
it is requested	please

J

jeopardise	risk
justify	prove, show the need for

L

liaise with	talk with, co-ordinate
limited number	a few
locality	place
locate	find

M

magnitude	size
manufacture	make
mandatory	must
marginal	small, slight
meet up with/meet with	meet
methodology	method
modification	change

N

nebulous	vague
necessitate	have to, need
no later than	by
notify	tell, let us know
notwithstanding	even if
nevertheless	but, however
none the less	even

O

obtain	get, receive
objective	aim, goal
occasioned by	caused by
officer	employee
on behalf of	for
on the grounds that	because
operate	work, run
opportunity	chance
option	choice
ordinarily	normally, usually
otherwise	or
outstanding	unpaid
outwith	outside of
owing to the fact that	because

P

partially	part
participate	take part in
particulars	details, facts
per	a, each
permissible	allowed
performed	did
permit	let, allow
persons	people, anyone
pertaining to	about, of, on
peruse	read, look at
pursuant to	under
possess	have, own
practically	almost, nearly
preclude	prevent
predominant	main
prescribed	set, fixed
preserve	keep
principal	main
prior to	before
procure	get, obtain
promptly	quickly, at once
promulgate	make known
proportion	part, share
provided that	if as long as
provisions	rules, terms
proximity	near
purchase	buy
purport	claim

Q

qualify for	can get, may be able to get
quote	say, give

R

re	about
recapitulate	sum up
receive	get
reconsider	think again
reduce	cut
regarding	about
regulation	rule
reimburse	repay, pay back
render	send, make, give
remain	stay
remainder	the rest
remittance	payment
remuneration	pay, wages, salary
report	tell
represents	shows, stands for, is
request	ask, question
require	need
[have a] responsibility to	must, should
reside	live
residence	home
restriction	limit
retain	keep
reverse	back
revised	new, changed

S

said	the
same	that
select	choose
shall (future)	will
shall (obligation)	must
signage	sign
so as to	to
solely	only
solicit	ask for
state	say, tell us, write down

statutory	legal, by law
subject to	as long as, if
submit	send, give
subsequently	later
subsequent to	after
substantial	large, great, a lot of
such	the
sufficient	enough
supplementary	extra, more
surname	last name

V

validate	confirm
variation	change
vendor	seller
viable	practical, workable
vicinity	near
virtually	almost
visualise	see, predict

T

terminate	end
thereafter	then
therefore	so
therein	there
thereof	its, their
to date	so far
to the extent that	if, when
transform	change
transmit	send, forward
transpire	happen

W

warrant	call for
whensoever	when
whereas	but
with reference to	about
with regard to	about, for
with respect to	about, for

Y

you are liable to	you have to
you are requested	please
your attention is drawn to	please see

U

ultimately	in the end
unavailability	lack of, absence of
undersigned	I, we
uniform	same
unit	building, house, site
until such time as	until
utilise, utilisation	usage, use
undertake to	agree to

Sources, extra reading and questions

Sources

A range of reference books, council style books and articles have been used in putting together this guide. They include:

Reference books:
Oxford Plain English Guide by Martin Cutts
The Complete Plain Words (revised) by Sir Ernest Gowers
Mind the Gaffe, the Penguin Guide to Common Errors in English by R. L. Task
Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar by Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner

Style guides:
Communications and Corporate Identity Style Guide (Medway Council)
Publication House Style Guidelines (Cheltenham Borough Council)
Crawley Council's Plain English Guide (Crawley Borough Council)
Corporate Identity & Style Guide (East Riding of Yorkshire Council)

Articles:
Not I. It's me by John Humphrys, The Times (October 2003)
Punctuation marks a way to sell books by David Smith, The Observer (November 2003)

Extra reading

If plain English, use of English and punctuation are subjects that interest you, then you may wish to look at some of the many publications available on these subjects. We can particularly recommend the book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves (The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation)* by Lynne Truss, published in 2003.

Questions

A selection of plain English, punctuation and grammar reference books is available at the publications unit at County Hall.

If you have any questions or are seeking clarification on plain English issues, please ring the unit on 823105.

Plain English checklist

- Use everyday English that is easy to understand

- Be concise and to the point

- Avoid technical terms and jargon wherever possible

- Use correct grammar and punctuate properly

- Aim for shorter, crisper sentences

- Use clear commands when giving instructions so readers understand what they must do

- Help the reader by using headings, lists and plain numbering

Notes

Notes

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