

Section B:

Writing style

Writing style

Almost as important as the way we visually present ourselves, is the way we write. Sometimes, the way we say things is just as important as what we say.

Alongside our corporate identity, adopting a uniform writing style helps to send a message to our service users that we are all one organisation and that they can expect any communication we send to be written in a clear and consistent way.

Although we all have different ways of writing, following this writing style guide will:

- help us all when writing for the public and for internal documents
- make our publications easy to read
- provide a better service
- clearly indicate that all our publications come from one organisation
- help to improve the public's perception of the council.

Abbreviations

When you use an abbreviation, always write the word out in full the first time, followed by the abbreviation in brackets. For example, Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO). Then use the abbreviation on its own for the rest of the document.

Initialisations should use capital letters without full stops when each letter is representative of a word in the title, for example, corporate management board would be CMB.

Acronyms begin with a capital letter, for example, Unicef or Unison.

Address

When addressing someone by name, for example, Dear James, sign off with 'Yours sincerely'.

When addressing someone by title or job, for example, Dear Director, sign off with 'Yours faithfully'.

Addresses should be written without punctuation, for example:

Islington Council
7 Newington Barrow Way
N7 7EP

Alignment

All text should always be left justified, including headings. Indenting of paragraphs is not necessary.

Ampersands (&)

Always write 'and' in full.

Articles

There are three articles:

use: 'The' when the noun is specific, for example, the council.

use: 'A' when the noun is generic and the article is followed by a word with a consonant sound, for example, a councillor.

use: 'An' when the noun is generic and the article is followed by a word with a vowel sound, for example, an officer.

Capital letters

Capital letters make reading more difficult and should only be used when necessary.

Use capital letters:

- to start a sentence
- for directorate names, for example, Corporate Resources
- for specific job titles, for example, Director of Finance
- for names of buildings, streets, areas, deities and some institutions, such as the Church
- for the Government, when referring to the current administration, but government when referring to an institution (like government bodies).

Do not use capital letters:

- for the council, the directorate, the borough
- for council services, for example, traffic and transportation or communications
- for names of committees, subcommittees, panels and other bodies, for example, south area committee, citizens' panel
- when referring generally to jobs or positions, for example, managers, officers, councillors, refuse collectors, librarians, social workers, head teachers
- when referring generally to local authorities, borough councils, district councils, parish councils, town councils, health authorities, police authorities
- for words like 'county', 'district' and 'region', unless they start a sentence

- for points of the compass unless they are part of a proper name such as South Kensington, or denote a region, such as unemployment in the South East
- for nouns that are not proper names
- for the seasons of the year
- for subject headings.

Councillors

Do not use capital letters when you write 'councillor' unless it forms part of a title, for example, Councillor Anne Other. Use the abbreviation Cllr not Coun, for example, Cllr Anne Other.

Dates

Write as 8 September 2011

not: 8th September 2011
September 8th 2011
September 8 2011

When referring to financial years or school years write as 2011/12.

not: 2011- 12
2011/12
2011-2012

Emphasis

Use bold to emphasise a word rather than capital letters or underlining. This is easier to read and avoids confusion particularly as underlined text is often used to show links to Internet pages.

Italics

Do not use italics as they are difficult to read because it's hard to recognise word shapes if all the letters are set at an angle.

Fonts

Ideally use Arial 12 point in Word documents (11 point minimum) to make text clear and easy to read.

Islington Council

Use initial capitals for the full name Islington Council, but when shortened it is 'the council'.

Money

Use the £ sign followed by figures, for example, £20.

Always spell out whole numbers when in text, for example, 'the bill ran into several hundred pounds'.

Write millions and billions as £2m, £30bn.

Write pounds and pence as £32.25 not £32.25p.

Numbers

Spell out words one to ten.

Use figures for numbers 11 upwards.

Spell out measurements, percentages and fractions if at the beginning of a sentence, for example, 'Twenty percent of residents responded'. Otherwise, use numbers for measurements, percentages and fractions, for example, 'The turnout was 20%'.

Numbers above 999 must have a separating comma, for example, 1,500 or 50,950.

Spaces

One space after a full stop is sufficient, as word processing will adjust the space accordingly.

Subject verb agreement

Nouns denoting a single group of people, for example, council, government, team, public, use a singular verb, for example: the team is organising...; the public needs information.

If you prefer the plural form of a group noun, write 'members of' or personalise in some other way, for example: members of the team are organising; members of the public need information.

Telephone numbers

In a sentence, use the word 'telephone' (lower case 't'), for example, telephone 020 7527 2000.

When included as part of an organisation's contacts details, you can use T followed by the number, for example, T 020 7527 2000.

For internal documents where you include an extension number, write 'ext 3263' not 'x 3263'.

For full London telephone numbers, write the area code first, leave one character space, write the next four digits, leave another character space and then write the last four digits, for example, 020 7527 2000.

For other regional numbers, write the area code first, then leave one character space, followed by the rest of the number, for example, 01794 234567.

The same applies to mobile numbers, for example, 07890 123456.

Times

- Use the 12-hour clock instead of the 24-hour clock, for example, 7.30pm not 19:30hrs.
- Use a full stop to separate hours and minutes instead of a colon, for example, 9.15pm not 9:15pm.
- Use am and pm with hours in numbers only not spelt out, for example, 9am not nine am but nine o'clock.
- Do not include zero minutes with hours unless necessary, for example, 9am not 9.00am but 9.15am.
- Write 12 noon (with a space) not 12pm.

Verbs – active and passive voice

The clearest order is subject, verb object.

Use the active voice whenever possible, subject before verb, for example, the manager called a meeting.

Avoid the passive voice (subject after the verb) as this is very unfriendly, for example, the meeting was called by the manager.

Only use the passive voice if there is no subject, for example, penalties will be applied.

Weights and measures

Use decimal and metric systems. Use abbreviations with figures and no spaces, such as 4mm, 10.2cm, 100m, 90km, 250gm, 5.5kg.

Punctuation marks

Apostrophes

The apostrophe is used for three reasons:

1. **to show that letter(s) have been left out:**
 - can't, don't, isn't, I'm
2. **to show possession. The position of the apostrophe depends on the possessive noun:**
 - a. for singular nouns:
a customer's complaints
 - b. for regular plural nouns:
many customers' complaints
 - c. for irregular plural nouns:
the children's complaints
3. **to show expressions of time:**
 - Thursday's meeting, seven days' notice, one week's pay

Remember, don't use apostrophes with pronouns.

- the council's policies
- its policies

'It's' with an apostrophe means 'it is' or 'it has', not 'belonging to it'.

Brackets

Use brackets to add something to the sentence, for example, the resident (from number 10) asked a question.

The full stop comes outside the bracket unless what is in the bracket is a full sentence.

Colons

Colons are always used to introduce any list, for example,

- only three people turned up for the meeting: Sarah, Rachel and Jane.

Colons can also be used to make a break when something explanatory follows:

- she had achieved her ambition: she was a member of the board.

Commas

Use commas:

- for a breathing pause in the sentence, for example, 'When they arrived, the meeting was over'
- in a list, for example, 'I went to the shop and bought bread, milk, cheese, tea and coffee'
- in pairs, in the same way we use brackets, for example, 'My line manager, John Smith, can help with this'.

Dashes

Use a single dash in the same way as a colon – to mark a break.

Use paired dashes – but only in the middle of a sentence – in the same way you would use brackets.

Make sure you use a dash (–) and not a hyphen (-).

Exclamation marks

An exclamation mark is used to show strength of feeling. Only use them in those circumstances:

- That's terrible!
- Wow!

Full stops

Do not use full stops between initials, for example MP not M.P.

Do not use after abbreviations such as Mr, Ms, Dr, Ltd, Cllr.

Hyphens

Use hyphens to avoid confusion:

- Mother to be asked... is not the same as Mother-to-be asked...

Use hyphens to distinguish between similar words, such as:

- reform and re-form
- resign and re-sign.

Hyphens can also be used:

- in double-barrelled adjectives, such as middle-aged
- with some prefixes, such as antenatal
- in phrases, such as t-shirt, door-to-door
- to avoid words with two consonants or vowels together, such as preempt, shelllike.

Inverted commas

Use double inverted commas to show direct speech. The full stop comes outside the inverted comma/s unless what is inside is a full sentence:

- the policeman said "You were driving far too quickly".

Use single quotation marks when a quotation appears within a quotation:

- she said "Don't say 'I know what you mean,' as you have no idea".

Use single inverted commas when quoting from a report, quoting a title of a book, play or film or when referring to a particular letter:

- I have just finished reading 'Catch 22'
- 'Star Wars' was great
- the letter 'm' refers to meeting.

Lists and bullet points

Lists and/or bullet points can break down information into manageable chunks. Do not use full stops or semi-colons to punctuate your list. Aim for a maximum of five bullet points as a guide. Use numbered lists if there is a priority to the order:

If you are the last person to leave the office, please make sure you:

- turn out all the lights
- lock the door
- leave the key at the front desk.

Use bulleted lists if there is no priority to the order:

When you sit your examination please bring with you:

- a pen
- a pencil
- an A4 writing pad.

Question marks

Question marks are only used at the end of a direct question:

- how are you going to tackle the problem?

They are not used at the end of indirect questions or polite requests:

- the director has asked how we are going to tackle the problem.

Semi-colons

The semi-colon acts as a weak full stop or a strong comma, to separate two very closely related sentences:

- we have studied this problem for several days; there are no easy answers
- I drive an old car; Steve drives a new one.

The plain English idea

Plain English is a way of writing that gets your meaning across clearly and concisely with your readers' needs in mind. It includes the clear design and layout of documents to make them easier to read and to help those with visual impairment. It also removes jargon, technical and legal terms, waffle and 'council speak'.

Why use plain English?

Using plain English makes things faster to read and to write.

It helps to get your message across more easily and in a friendlier way.

It is more cost effective, cutting down on time and paper.

Using plain English

Use plain English when you are writing. This means short concise sentences, avoiding jargon wherever possible. The council has corporate membership of the Plain English Campaign (PEC), a national organisation that encourages clear communication.

We can send our documents for checking and editing, after which they receive Crystal Marks for clarity.

If you have any questions about getting Crystal Marks or receiving plain English training, please contact Communications.

You can find out more about the PEC by visiting www.plainenglish.co.uk

Preparation

Writing can be broken down into content and writing style:

- decide what you want your document to cover
- decide who you want to read and understand it
- make a plan showing the information in the order it will make sense
- look at your plan again later with 'fresh' eyes
- get your plan approved before you start writing
- don't skip the planning.

Use everyday language

- use everyday words
- don't use 'baby language'
- don't use unnecessarily complicated language
- explain unfamiliar words or jargon as you go along, or use a glossary, but call it something else like 'useful terms'
- read your writing out loud. If there are any problems, you will hear where they are.

Relying on your computer

Although some programs can give a quick overall assessment of certain aspects of your writing, they cannot tell you if your writing is good or not. Spell and grammar checks can never replace proof-reading by you or someone else.

General points

The following points will help you to get your meaning across clearly and concisely with your reader's needs in mind:

- use language your audience will understand
- split your information into short, easily absorbed paragraphs or sections
- keep sentences short – an average of 15–20 words throughout the text
- don't include too many ideas in a sentence. One main idea, with possibly one sub-clause, is enough for most sentences
- be as brief as you can without losing clarity. The clearest word order is subject, verb, object
- avoid abbreviations if you can
- avoid jargon if you can. When you have to use particular words for the sake of accuracy, explain them in plain language the first time you use them
- keep punctuation simple and accurate
- be direct and clear. People respond more positively to a direct style. For example, 'We will tell you if...'; or 'I received your letter about...'
- write in the active rather than the passive voice: 'we will write to you', rather than 'a letter will be sent'; 'we will decide', rather than 'a decision will be made'

The plain English idea

- repeat words rather than using alternatives simply for the sake of variety. For instance, it would be confusing to use 'client', 'customer', 'passenger' and 'ticket holder' in the same document if they all mean the same thing
 - avoid ambiguity. This could include:
 - pronouns such as 'it', 'this', 'they' if they don't refer back to something you have already mentioned
 - words which have different meanings in different contexts, for example, 'the council had to refuse the refuse'.
 - avoid negatives. 'Please return the form by 1 April 2011' is friendlier and easier to understand than 'We will not be able to deal with forms after 1 April 2011'
 - avoid using nouns where the infinitive of the verb is better. Use:
 - we would like you to apply rather than 'make an application'
 - we would like you to deliver rather than 'make a delivery'
 - we would like you to decide rather than 'make a decision'.
- are best placed between two sentences:
- 'and' (this means an addition is following)
 - 'or' (this means an alternative is following)
 - 'but' (this means a contrast is following)
 - 'because' (this means a reason is following)
 - split infinitives but only by one word, so you can say 'to publicly acknowledge'
 - end a sentence with a preposition (for example, 'in', 'on', 'up', 'to', 'over', 'with', 'by', 'of and so on') when it's a question, for example, 'who are you writing to?'
 - end a sentence with a preposition if you believe it sounds natural, for example, 'the council hasn't considered this before'.
 - put a comma before 'and', 'or' and 'but'
 - use 'I' and 'we' in the same sentence as long as you are not confusing the reader.

Plain English ideas to help make your sentence flow better.

It's ok to:

- start a sentence with conjunctions that can be placed between sentences or at the beginning of sentences, for example, 'so', 'therefore', 'also' 'however'. These are linking words and sometimes lead to a second thought.

However, it is better not to start sentences with conjunctions that

Words and phrases to avoid

The words and phrases below often crop up in letters and reports. They are usually over-qualification and unnecessary so they can comfortably be removed from a sentence without changing the meaning or the tone:

Words

- absolutely
- abundantly
- actually
- basically
- currently
- existing
- extremely
- obviously

- of course
- quite
- really
- very

Phrases

- all things being equal
- as a matter of fact
- as far as I am concerned
- a total of
- at the end of the day
- at this moment in time
- each and every one
- I am of the opinion that
- in due course
- in other words
- in the end
- in the final analysis
- in respect of
- in this connection
- in total
- in view of the fact that
- it should be understood
- I would like to say
- I would like to take this opportunity
- last but not least
- other things being equal
- the fact of the matter is
- the month(s) of
- to all intents and purposes
- to be honest
- to one's own mind

If you find yourself about to write, type or dictate a word you wouldn't use in everyday conversation, look it up in the A to Z of alternatives on the following pages. Often there will be a choice of several words you could use instead. Pick one that best fits what you are trying to say and is best for the reader.

Remember, write to express, not to impress.

Plain English A-Z

A

(an) **absence of** – no, none
abundance – enough, plenty, a lot (or say how many)
accede – to allow, agree to
accelerate – speed up
accentuate – stress
accommodation – where you live, home
accompanying – with
accomplish – do, finish
according to our records – our records show
accordingly – in line with this, so
acknowledge – thank you for
acquaint yourself with – find out about, read
acquiesce – agree
acquire – buy, get
additional – extra, more
adjacent – next to
adjustment – change, alteration
admissible – allowed, acceptable
advantageous – useful, helpful
advise – tell, say (unless you are giving advice)
affix – add, write, fasten, stick on, fix to
afford an opportunity – let, allow
afforded – given
aforesaid – this, earlier in this document
aggregate – total
aligned – lined up, in line
alleviate – ease, reduce
allocate – divide, share, add, give
along the lines of – like, as in
alternative – choice, other
alternatively – or
ameliorate – improve, help
amendment – change
anticipate – expect
apparent – clear, plain, obvious, seeming
applicant (the) – you
application – use
appreciable – large, great
apprise – inform, tell
appropriate – proper, correct, right, suitable

appropriate – to suitable for
approximately – about, roughly
as a consequence of – because
as of the date of – from
as regards – about, on the subject of
ascertain – find out
assemble – build, gather, put together
assistance – help
at an early date – soon (or say when)
at its discretion – can, may (or edit out)
at the moment – now
at the present time – now
attempt – try
attend – come to, go to, be at
attributable – due to, because of
authorise – allow, let
authority – right, power, may (as in 'have the authority to')
axiomatic – obvious, goes without saying

B

belated – late
beneficial – helpful, useful
bestow – give, award
breach – break
by means of – by

C

calculate – work out, decide
cease – finish, stop, end
circumvent – get round, avoid, skirt, circle
clarification – explanation, help
combine – mix
combined – together
commence – start, begin
communicate – talk, write, telephone (be specific)
competent – able, can
compile – make, collect
complete – fill in, finish
completion – end
comply with – keep to, meet
component – part

comprise make up, include (it is)
compulsory (you) must
conceal hide
concerning about, on
conclusion end
concur agree
condition rule
consequently so
considerable great, important
constitute make up, form
construe interpret
consult talk to, meet, ask
consumption amount used
contemplate think about
contrary to against, despite
correct put right
correspond write
costs the sum of costs
counter against
courteous polite
cumulative added up, added together
currently now
customary usual, normal

D

deduct – take off, take away
deem – to be treat as
defer – put off, delay
deficiency – lack of
delete – cross out
demonstrate – show, prove
denote – show
depict – show
designate – point out, show, name
desire – wish, want
despatch or dispatch – send, post
despite the fact that – though, although
determine – decide, work out, set, end
detrimental – harmful, damaging
difficulties – problems
diminish – lessen, reduce
disburse – pay, pay out
discharge – carry out
disclose – tell, show
disconnect – cut off, unplug
discontinue – stop, end
discrete – separate

discuss – talk about
disseminate – spread
documentation – papers, documents
domiciled – in living in
dominant – main
due – to the fact of because, as
duration – time, life
during – which time while
dwelling – home

E

economical – cheap, good value
eligible – allowed, qualified
elucidate – explain, make clear
emphasise – stress
empower – allow, let
enable – allow
enclosed – inside, with
(please find) enclosed – I enclose
encounter – meet
endeavour – try
enquire – ask
enquiry – question
ensure – make sure
entitlement – right
envisage – expect, imagine
equivalent – equal, the same
erroneous – wrong
establish – show, find out, set up
evaluate – test, check
evince – show, prove
ex officio – because of his or her position
exceptionally – only when, in this case
excessive – too many, too much
exclude – leave out
excluding – apart from, except
exclusively – only
exempt – from free from
expedite – hurry, speed up
expeditiously – quickly
expenditure – spending
expire – run out
extant – current, in force
extremity – limit

F

fabricate – make, make up
facilitate – help, make possible
factor – reason
failure – to if you do not
finalise – end, finish
following – after
for the duration of – during, while
for the purpose of – to, for
for the reason that – because
formulate – plan, devise
forthwith – now, at once
forward – send
frequently – often
furnish – give
further – to after, following
furthermore – then, also, and

G

generate – produce, give, make
give consideration to – consider, think about
grant – give

H

henceforth – from now on, from today
hereby – now, by this (or edit out)
herein – here (or edit out)
hereinafter – after this (or edit out)
hereof – of this
hereto – to this
heretofore – until now, previously
hereunder – below
herewith – with this (or edit out)
hitherto – until now
hold in abeyance – wait, postpone
hope and trust – hope, trust (but not both)

I

if and when – if, when (but not both)
illustrate – show, explain
immediately – at once, now
implement – carry out, do
imply – suggest, hint at
in a number of cases – some (or say how many)

in accordance with – as under, in line with, because of
in addition (to) – and, as well as, also
in advance – before
in case of – if
in conjunction with – and, with
in connection with – for, about
in consequence – because, as a result
in excess of – more than
in lieu of – instead of
in order that – so that
in receipt of – get, have, receive
in relation – to about
in respect of – about, for
in the absence of – without
in the course of – while, during
in the event of/that – if
in the majority of instances – most, mostly
in the near future – soon
in the neighbourhood of – about, around
in view of the fact that – as, because
inappropriate – wrong, unsuitable
inception – start, beginning
incorporating – which includes
incurred – have to pay, owe
indicate – show, suggest
inform – tell
initially – at first
initiate – begin, start
insert – put in
instances – cases
intend to – will
intimate – say, hint
irrespective of – despite, even if
is in accordance with – agrees with, follows.
is of the opinion – thinks
issue – give, send
it is known that – I/we know that

J

jeopardise – risk, threaten

L

(a) large number of – many, most (or say how many)

(to) liaise with – to meet with, to discuss with, to work with (whichever is more descriptive)

locality – place, area

locate – find, put

M

magnitude – size

(it is) mandatory – (you) must

manner – way

manufacture – make

marginal – small, slight

material – relevant

materialise – happen, occur

may in the future – may, might, could

merchandise – goods

mislay – lose

modification – change

moreover – and, also, as well

N

negligible – very small

nevertheless – but, however, even so

notify – tell, let us/you know

notwithstanding – even if, despite, still, yet

numerous – many (or say how many)

O

objective – aim, goal

(it is) obligatory – (you) must

obtain – get, receive

occasioned by – caused by, because of

on behalf of – for

on numerous occasions – often

on receipt of – when we/you get

on request – if you ask

on the grounds that – because

on the occasion that – when, if

operate – work, run

optimum – best, ideal

option – choice

ordinarily – normally, usually

otherwise – or

outstanding – unpaid

owing to – because of

P

(a) percentage of – some, (or say what percentage)

participate – join in, take part

particulars – details, facts

per annum – a year

perform – do

permissible – allowed

permit – let, allow

personnel – people, staff

persons – people, anyone

peruse – read, read carefully, look at

place – put

possess – have, own

possessions – belongings

practically – almost, nearly

predominant – main

prescribe – set, fix

preserve – keep, protect

previous – earlier, before, last

principal – main

prior to – before

proceed – go ahead

procure – get, obtain, arrange

profusion of – plenty, too many (or say how many)

prohibit – ban, stop

projected – estimated

prolonged – long

promptly – quickly, at once

promulgate – advertise, announce

proportion – part

provide – give

provided that – if, as long as

provisions – rules, terms

proximity – closeness, nearness

purchase – buy

pursuant to – under, because of, in line with

Q

qualify for – can get, be able to get

R

reconsider – think again about, look again at

reduce – cut

reduction – cut

referred to as – called

refer to – talk about, mention

(have) regard to – take into account

regarding – about, on

regulation – rule

reimburse – repay, pay back

reiterate – repeat, restate

relating to – about

remain – stay

remainder – the rest, what is left

remittance – payment

remuneration – pay, wages, salary

render – make, give, send

represent – show, stand for, be

request – ask, question

require – need, want, force

requirements – needs, rules

reside – live

residence – home, where you live

restriction – limit

retain – keep

review – look at (again)

revised – new, changed

S

said/such/same – the, this, that

salient – the most important

scrutinise – read (look at) carefully

select – choose

settle – pay

similarly – also, in the same way

solely – only

specified – given, written, set

state – say, tell us, write down

statutory – legal, by law

subject to – depending on, under,

submit – send, give

subsequent – to/upon, after

subsequently – later

substantial – large, great, a lot of
 substantially – more or less
 sufficient – enough
 supplement – go with, add to
 supplementary – extra, more
 supply – give, sell, delivery

T

(the) tenant – you
 terminate – stop, end
 that being the case – if so
 the question as to whether – whether
 thereafter – then, afterwards
 thereby – by that, because of that
 therein – in that, there
 thereof – of that
 thereto – to that
 thus – so, therefore
 to date – so far, up to now
 to the extent that – if, when
 transfer – change, move
 transmit – send

U

ultimately – in the end, finally
 unavailability – lack of
 undernoted – the following
 undersigned – I, we
 undertake – agree, promise, do
 uniform – same, similar
 unilateral – one-sided, one-way
 unoccupied – empty
 until such time – until
 utilisation – use
 utilise – use

V

variation – change
 virtually – almost (or edit out)
 visualise – see, predict

W

ways and means – ways
 we have pleasure in – we are glad to
 whatsoever – whatever, what, any
 whensoever – when
 whereas – but
 whether or not – whether
 with a view to – to, so that
 with effect from – from
 with reference to – about
 with regard to – about, for
 with respect to – about, for
 with the minimum of delay – quickly (or say when)

Y

you are requested – please
 your attention is drawn – please see, please note

Z

zone – area, region

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 The A to Z of alternative words