

# Plain English guidelines at a glance



National Adult Literacy Agency  
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

## **Think of the person reading your information.**

Make it clear whom you are writing to or about by using 'I', 'we' and 'you' where you can.

## **Be direct and use the active voice most of the time.**

Try to put the person, group or thing doing the action at the start of the sentence as much as possible. For example, say, "We will decide on your application soon" instead of "A decision on your application will be made soon."

## **Avoid unnecessary jargon.**

Aim to replace technical terms with their plainer alternatives. If you cannot do this, at least define the terms plainly.

## **Define unfamiliar abbreviations and acronyms.**

As with technical terms, try to keep these to a minimum. If you even suspect they might not be familiar to your reader, spell them out.

## **Avoid Latin and French expressions.**

Since people can confuse e.g., i.e. and etc., try to use the full, English equivalents 'for example', 'that is' and 'and so on' – or try rewriting your sentence. Similarly, use the English equivalent of phrases such as 'in lieu' and 'inter alia' to avoid confusion.

## **Have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence.**

Keep sentences manageable. It is acceptable to mix longer, well-punctuated, sentences with shorter, snappier ones for variety.

## **Remove unnecessary words and phrases.**

Only use as many words as you need to get your message across clearly. For example, use 'before' instead of 'in advance of', 'because' instead of 'owing to the fact that' and 'if' instead of 'in the event that'.

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## **Avoid using nouns made from verbs (nominalisations).**

Try to make actions concrete. For example, use 'consider' instead of 'consideration', 'establish' instead of 'establishment' and 'discuss' instead of 'discussion'.

## **Be consistent with terms.**

To avoid confusing your reader, use the same term for the same concept or thing throughout your document. For example, if you call something a standard, avoid later calling it a benchmark, a guideline or a norm.

## **Break up dense text.**

Aim to use informative sub-headings, question-and-answer formats and bulleted lists to break up text and help your reader find their way through your document.

## **Use any colour and images appropriately.**

If you use colour, make sure it's easy on the eye and has a clear purpose. If using images and charts, make sure they genuinely help explain the text. Most importantly, avoid busy background images, which can be distracting.

## **Use space to help your text stand out.**

Use 1.5 line spacing so the eye can easily move from one line to the next. Align your text to the left to avoid large gaps between words, which can happen when text is justified.

## **Use a clear, readable font.**

Use a clear, unfussy, font such as Arial, Verdana or Tahoma and aim for 12 point as standard. Try not to have more than three distinct fonts in a document.

## **Emphasise text carefully.**

Only use bold to emphasise text. Keep capital letters to a minimum to avoid SHOUTING AT YOUR READER! Avoid underlining and putting phrases in italics, as these types of formatting tend to make text harder to read.