

Mini Guide to Plain English

Language is a form of communication. It can be used to preserve historical facts, to document legal proceedings, or tell a story. It is a method for transferring information from one person to another, and, hopefully, without losing any of the meaning or conveying a message not intended by the writer.

Whatever it is we are writing, we need to make sure that it is written in such a way that someone else will understand our intended meaning. This is known as writing in plain English.

Using plain English means using language at the right level of sophistication of your intended reader. It does not necessarily mean using the most basic words possible, rather it means balancing the style, tone and language of your work with your intended reader's level of understanding.

It is also worth remembering that language is fluid. Words are fluid. Words and meanings change over time.

How can I write in plain English?

Before you can begin to write in plain English, you need to understand the meaning of the different parts of speech and how they relate to each other. The following table provides a basic overview of the different parts of speech.

Grammatical term	What it means	How to remember	Example
Adjective	A word that modifies a noun/ pronoun	Descriptive words	She is the busiest person I know.
Adverb	A word that modifies a verb, adjective or other word	Modifiers	Jack very rarely spills the water.
Conjunction	A word that connections a word or group of words	Joining words	Jack and Jill argued because he dropped the pail of water.
Interjection	A word, or a group of words, that expresses feelings or attitudes, but have no grammatical function.	Exclaiming words	Fat chance! Good riddance! Good luck!
Noun	A specific word for a person, thing, place or condition.	Naming words	John has got the measles. Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall.
Preposition	A word that connects a noun or a pronoun to another word.	Connecting words	Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Peter received a letter from his lawyer.
Pronoun	A word used in place of a noun.	Name replacements	Peter was shocked. His mind went blank.
Verb	A word that expresses an action or a state of being.	Doing words.	Peter is usually considerate when driving. The lawyer will be writing again.

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Which words should I use? Which words should I avoid?

It is important to remember that some words are more acceptable to use than others, depending on the genre and style of writing. For example, it is more acceptable to use flowery, ornate, antiquated or colloquial language in creative writing, but this would be unacceptable in business writing, which tends to be more formulaic and concise.

Matching your writing style to your intended readership, and choosing language accordingly, will help you identify which words to use, and which ones to avoid.

What should my writing do?

Your writing should communicate messages, ideas and concepts to a reader. Using clear language conveys a message effectively. You need to consider who your readership is, what style of writing they would be used to reading, and match your style to the expectations of the readership.

How can I test whether my language is clear?

A good way of testing whether your writing and choice of language is clear and can be understood is to read your work out aloud. Listening to the words can help you to identify awkward sounding phrases and where the sentences are lacking punctuation. If your latest creative masterpiece is difficult to say aloud, then it is almost certainly going to be difficult to read.

Should I engage an editor or a proof-reader?

Editors are able to cast a professionally-trained eye over your work and make comments about its overall structure, content and style. They identify inconsistencies – such as changes in character names, places, dates, forms of transport, and ensure continuity of style. They can also check the content of your book for factual accuracy.

Professional proof-readers can also be invaluable. Having a fresh pair of eyes looking over your work always identifies spelling and grammatical errors, stray letters and typographical errors. An independent also reads what is actually written down, rather than what they expect to be there, which happens all too frequently when you are so familiar with your book.

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