

GUIDE TO USING **Plain English**



**'All our communications
should be like a
conversation with a friend'**

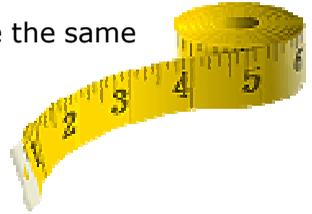


Plain English Essentials

Keep Your Sentences Short

Is there an ideal sentence length? Probably not but once you get above 20 words, it is time to think about a full stop.

This does not mean making every sentence the same length. Be punchy. Varying your sentence length makes your writing more interesting and so more readable. The key point is to limit each sentence to one message.



If you find yourself adding commas to a sentence to make the meaning clearer, that is a sign that the sentence may be getting too long. Consider using a full stop (period).

After a little practice, writing shorter sentences will become natural. Below is an example of how you can shorten your sentences while making them easier to read:

Too long: *Because of building works that have lead to a major electrical fault at our Guildford training centre it will be necessary to reschedule our Time Management training course from February 18 to February 25.*

Better: *Building works at our Guildford training centre have caused a major electrical fault. It will be necessary to reschedule our Time Management training course from February 18 to February 25.*

Prefer Active to Passive Verbs

What are active and passive verbs?

The verb is the 'doing' word in a sentence. In its **active** form, the person or thing that **does** the action is the

subject. Eg *I dropped the mirror*. *I* is the subject and *dropped* is the verb. This is **active**.

In its **passive** form the person or thing that the action **is done to** is the subject. Eg *The mirror was dropped by me*. *The mirror* is the subject and *was dropped* is the verb. This is **passive**.

Why prefer active to passive?

- active verbs make sentences sound crisp and businesslike
- they are easier to understand

Passive verbs have several disadvantages:

- they can be confusing
- they often make writing more long-winded
- they make writing less lively

Some examples:

Passive:

Menus are to be found in the holder on the table in front of you. (a little stiff and formal)

Active:

You can find menus in the holder on the table in front of you. (crisp and clear)

When to use the passive verb

There are times when it can be helpful to use passive verbs:

- When you want something to sound less hostile - *This invoice has not been paid* (passive) is softer than *You have not paid this invoice* (active).
- To avoid blame - *An error was made* (passive) rather than *We made an error* (active).
- When the facts aren't clear - *The team has been selected*.
- Use your judgment – passive sounds better sometimes.

'Conversations with a friend' series...

- ▶ Grammar and Style Guide
- ▶ Email Best Practice
- ▶ Guide to using Plain English



We hope this guide was useful and if you would like to find out about courses to improve your writing even more, then please contact:

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