Accessible information - plain language

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not plain english

High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process.

plain english

Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.

Plain language is not designed to corrupt and debase the glories of the English language. It is designed to communicate precisely the things you need to communicate to your intended audience. We use the term plain language because many of the principles here can apply to information produced in any language.

Benefits of plain language

Readers are more likely to:

- bother to read clear concise documents than long complex ones;
- understand what you are saying;
- favour organisations that say things clearly.

Information providers benefit because:

- your message is more likely to be understood and acted upon;
- shorter documents require less paper;
- you can say more in the same space;
- translations into, for example, Braille are cheaper to produce and easier to use.

Guidelines

Before you start writing be clear about:

- who you are talking to;
- what you want to tell them;
- what they want and need to know;
- what you want them to do as a result of reading your information
- Decide what to say and in what order.
- Think about the language your audience is likely to be familiar with.
- Weed out irrelevant information.

Structure

- Summarise key points at the beginning of the piece.
- Start with the most important information your reader needs to know.
- Use clear headings to break up the text into useable chunks.
- If some technical words are unavoidable, consider a glossary.

Style

- Use language your audience will understand.
- Split your information into short, easily absorbed paragraphs.
- Keep sentences to an average of 15-20 words.
- Try to only have one concept per paragraph and one idea per sentence.
- Be as brief as you can. The clearest sentence order is subject, verb, object. For example: "I use olive oil" is better than "olive oil is what I use" or "olive oil is used by me".
- Avoid abbreviations.
- Avoid jargon.
- If you have to use particular words for the sake of accuracy, explain them in the text the first time you use them.
- Keep punctuation simple and accurate. Many people are confused by semi-colons, colons, square brackets

and so on. Many people are confused by sloppy or ambiguous use of punctuation.

- Use direct language. Write as though you were talking to someone in the same room.
- Use the active rather than passive voice.
- For example "we will decide" rather than "a decision will be made".
- Repeat words rather than using alternatives for the sake of variety and be careful using words like 'it', 'this' or 'they' to refer back to something you have mentioned earlier.
- Avoid phrases where a single verb will do. For example 'deliver' rather than 'arrange a delivery to'.

It's not all bad news

These are simply guidelines. The important thing is that whatever you write should make sense when you read it. Long sentences are not banned, varying the length of sentences helps readability. There is no harm in breaking grammar rules if it helps to make a meaning clearer, for example, you can end a sentence with a preposition! It is clearer to write "the people we talked to" than "the people to whom we talked". There is no harm in starting sentences with And, But or Because if that breaks a long sentence.

Check your writing

There are a number of computer and other reading checks that can help to an extent. More information on reading tests can be found at www.timetabler.com/reading.html and a useful tool, the Bull Fighter is available at www.fightthebull.com/bullfighter.asp . These tools are useful but the best way, without a doubt, is to find someone appropriate to read out loud what you have written. We often use phrasing in our written work that, while it looks natural to us on the page, sounds clunky when read aloud. Test everything!

In brief

1 Using plain language benefits you and the reader

2 Think about who are you writing for and use information and language that is appropriate

3 Get someone else to read it, ideally someone who understands the target audience

4 Keep it simple

5 Make sure that you use plain English for all written information
www.plainenglish.co.uk

Sensory Trust

The Sensory Trust promotes and supports the creation and management of outdoor spaces that can be used and enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age or ability.

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