Writing Plain English

Most readers of course leaflets want to obtain the relevant information with the minimum amount of effort. The principles of Plain English are a good basis for developing effective communications materials.

The Plain English Campaign

The Plain English Campaign has been working since 1979 to champion the cause of recipients of publications, letters and forms which are incomprehensible, misleading or just plain hard work to read. They make annual awards for examples which fail to live up to their standards – 'The Golden Bulls'. On the positive side, they also offer a service where they will assess documents (at a substantial fee) and award the 'Crystal Mark' for clarity. The Plain English Campaign also produces some useful guides and runs training courses in writing techniques. If you would like further information or to obtain any of their publications the contact number is 01663 734541.

What is Plain English?

The main principles of Plain English are set out in the following bullet points. They provide good indicators for writers to assess their own work critically and to make improvements.

? ***Write Simply***
All information intended for external readers should be written in a clear, straightforward manner, aimed at the non-specialist.

? ***Adopt a Suitable Tone of Voice***
How do you want your readers to perceive you?

Friendly/draconian
Approachable/unapproachable
Warm/distant

All these moods can be created by the way in which you 'speak' to your readers.

A more informal, friendly and welcoming approach can be gained by calling the reader 'you' and referring to yourself/your department as 'we'. Imagine you are talking to a potential student: this helps in giving a conversational style to your text and you will find that you automatically simplify sentence structure and avoid difficult concepts.

? ***Aim for Simple Words where Possible***
This does not necessarily mean writing in 'Janet and John' style but over-use of 'officious' language can make a document more difficult to read. There are simpler, or more commonly used, versions of most words which can be substituted. The following examples provide an illustration of the above but are not always synonymous:

Acquire.....................................	*Gain*
Commence	*Begin*
Enable	*Help*
Henceforth	*From now on*
Permissible	*Allowed*
Predominant	*Main*
Provide	*Give/make available*
Require	*Need*
Substantial	*Large*
Terminate	*End*

The level of writing should obviously be tailored to the typical reader. Bear in mind, however, that a simpler level of language does not have to be patronising – it just makes reading easier for *all* people.

? *Cut the Jargon*

'Jargon' is the term for expressions that are used as a sort of 'private' language by specific groups of people. In these circles it becomes everyday language and the users forget that outsiders may not understand it easily.

Typical examples are acronyms or initialisation of organisation titles or use of Latin phrases such as *ibid., ipso facto, prima facie* which assume that the reader is familiar with the meaning of the expression.

Another form of jargon is caused by the assumption of knowledge – do not write for the reader who has already studied your subject for many years!

? *Avoid Long Sentences*

These make reading hard work. The Plain English Campaign suggests an average length of 15–20 words but this is for materials aimed at readers from the general public with a wide range of reading ability. More educated people will have a greater tolerance and the odd longer sentence is acceptable.

Remember. Short sentences can be punchy. They convey ideas quickly. They push the message home.

? ***Use Active Verbs***
The difference between active and passive verbs is the relationship between the grammatical elements in the sentence. An active verb is one where the person or thing which is performing the action is the same as the subject. For example

The university enrolled the student.

The department offered the course.

Passive verbs tend to make longer sentences and the meaning is not as direct. They are created by using a form of the verb 'to be' (was, are, will, etc) along with a past participle of the verb which usually ends in -ed)

The student was enrolled by the university.

The course was offered by the department.

You can also use imperatives or instructions to eliminate the passives.

? ***Be Aware of the Basic Rules of Writing***
But note that sometimes following the rules can result in very clumsy sentences – rules are made to be broken!

* Try not to use the same word twice within the same sentence or in a closely positioned sentence.

* Avoid split infinitives, (ie where a word is placed between the *to* and the infinitive form of the verb), eg
> *to accurately measure* is split
> *to measure accurately* is the preferred form.