

# Plain English Style Guide for the Public Service

**A resource to improve the quality and consistency of our communications**



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## Foreword

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The greater use of plain language is an important part of the Government's Public Service Reform agenda. Using plain language makes communications more effective, makes our services more accessible and increases efficiency. We want to provide the best possible services. Giving people the information they need in language they understand is an important part of this.

As public servants, we receive a constant flow of complex information that we must read, understand and often communicate to others, all within demanding timeframes. This information can be overly complicated and can include jargon and unnecessarily long sentences. The adoption of plain language (and plain English in this case) will make us think about how we present information and will encourage the widespread use of good plain English, as set out in this guide. The guide will help you and your colleagues to produce better documents that readers will more easily understand on the first reading.

This document also includes guidance on general writing style principles, such as formatting and grammar. You will find advice on topics such as tone, how to write actively rather than passively, how to use lists and headings effectively and how to use punctuation correctly.

We hope you enjoy using this resource and apply the guidelines in your day-to-day work.

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Dr Orlaigh Quinn  
Programme Director  
Reform and Delivery Office  
September 2016



## About this style guide

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There are different ways to use the English language and each of these can be equally correct. While different styles and strategies may be correct, there are guidelines that will help us be clearer and consistent. This style guide aims to help develop a more consistent approach to writing across the Public Service.

By 'style' we mean things like:

- how you refer to your organisation,
- how you write certain words (government or Government?),
- how you format dates and numbers, and
- how to write in a clear and direct way.

You can refer to this guide when writing documents or online content aimed at the general public. You can also use it when writing in-house documents. This guide has been developed in line with plain English writing and presentation guidelines. Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the **first** time they read or hear it. Developing this guide is part of our commitment under the Public Service Reform agenda to respond to the needs of public service users.

We have tried to make this guide an **at-a-glance document** that gives examples of the style we recommend. Also, to help you use this guide every day, we try to show you rather than tell you.

Please email us at [reformoffice@per.gov.ie](mailto:reformoffice@per.gov.ie) if you have any comments on this guide.

**Rather than read this style guide from beginning to end, look at just those sections you need now. Later, you can always read more.**

# What is plain English?

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Plain English is a style of presenting information that helps someone understand it the first time they read or hear it. It is a more efficient way of writing that allows people to access, understand and use information quickly and effectively.

To write in plain English you first need to put yourself in your reader's shoes.

When you use plain English you:

- write in clear language,
- keep things simple,
- use short sentences and paragraphs,
- give relevant information in the right order, and
- help people to find this information quickly.



# Why use plain English?

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It makes sense to use plain English. It works for all kinds of documents – from an internal memo to a complicated legal report. Plain English is often used for documents and websites that the public rely on to make decisions. It is also useful to your colleagues, who may be too busy to read through a long document to pull out key points. Plain English can enhance any level of communication.

It can help you produce clearer documents that people can better understand. It's only fair - giving people the information they need in language they understand helps them make informed choices, access their entitlements and meet their legal duties.

"In my work, I come across many cases where the language used in certain records, letters and other documents has been the underlying cause of the complaint at issue. The failure properly to understand the terms of a benefit scheme, for example, can lead to the denial of that scheme to the individual involved. Access to information means more than the simple receipt of records; it also means access to information in language that is readily comprehensible."

Emily O'Reilly, Ombudsman, 2005

## Reasons for using plain English

- **One in six** people find it difficult to read and understand everyday documents such as a health leaflet, a bus timetable or medicine instructions.
- Readers scan information on web pages, but **people with reading difficulties cannot scan** – they read word by word.

## How plain English saves time and money

- When Arizona's Department of Revenue rewrote one letter in plain English, it received 11,000 fewer phone calls than it had the previous year. Plain English helped improve customer service, efficiency and staff morale.
- After producing a clearer bill in plain English, BT saw customer inquiries fall by 25% each quarter in a year. Customers also paid their bills more promptly, which improved revenue and reduced the cost of collecting overdue bills.



## Who uses plain English?

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In **Ireland**, many public sector organisations have contacted NALA (the National Adult Literacy Agency) for assistance with plain English. Some examples include:

- the Health Service Executive – assistance with forms, leaflets and reports;
- the Office for the Director of Public Prosecutions – assistance with booklets on going to court as well as training on letter writing;
- the Office of the Ombudsman – assistance with leaflets about making complaints;
- the Revenue Commissioners – assistance with presenting information on the web and application forms and leaflets; and
- the Department of Social Protection – assistance with application forms and explanatory booklets.

The Central Bank of Ireland has regulations in its Consumer Protection Code that requires the firms and businesses it regulates to use plain language. In other countries, such as the USA, there is legislation on plain writing.

## Planning what you are going to write

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You should always plan what you are going to write. This will make it easier and faster when you start to write. In planning, the golden rule is to keep your reader in mind and think about what they need to know. You should ask the following questions when writing your document or web text.

- How familiar are your readers with the terminology you use?
- What subjects can you assume they understand?
- How will they read your document or text? Will they read it straight through or skip to the sections that interest them?
- Will you need to explain any details they may not be familiar with?
- Will you need to give background to the information?
- How are you going to structure your information in a logical sequence?

## Structuring information

Readers are busy, so it is important to order information in a way that is easy to see and act on. Depending on your document and your audience, you can choose between two main ways of structuring your information.

- **Put the main information at the top** of your document or web page. This makes it immediately visible to your reader. You can use this approach for policy documents, press releases, leaflets, letters, web content, posts, Tweets, and so on.
- **Put information familiar to the reader before new information.** The familiar information can help guide readers to any new information. It helps settle the reader. However, it is important to get to the point and to keep the known information concise.

Whatever way you choose to structure your information, make your document easy to navigate. You can do this by:

- using bold to emphasise important words;
- using a clear heading structure;
- making sure that your sentences are concise; and
- using lists (see Lists).

## Using an appropriate tone

When writing, use a professional and helpful tone. The tone you want to achieve will depend on your audience and the topic you are writing about. Here are some examples of how to keep your tone professional.

Instead of	Write
Should the response require considerable research before a full reply can be given, an interim reply explaining the position will be sent.	If we need to do a lot of research to give you a full reply, we will write to let you know.
Receipt of your application is acknowledged.	Thank you for your application.
In relation to your payment, the Department of Social Protection and Family Affairs is providing an opportunity to meet with us...	I am writing to invite you to meet us...
In reference to your application for...	I am writing about your application for...

The Office of the Director of Public Prosecution works hard to create the right tone in its documents. For example, in its booklet 'Going to Court as a Witness', you can see (in the box below) that it empathises with the readers from the start.

### **Introduction**

Going to court can be stressful for many victims and witnesses. If you need to give evidence in a criminal trial, we hope that this booklet will help you to understand what happens in court.

The booklet tries to answer the questions that people ask us most often. It does not deal with every possible situation and it does not give you legal advice. If you need legal advice, you should talk to a solicitor.

We also have a booklet 'The Role of the DPP' that explains in plain language what the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) does. For a more detailed description of the work of our Office, please see our 'Guidelines for Prosecutors'.

When you empathise with your reader, you will write clearer information. This booklet is available to download at this link:

[http://bit.ly/dpp\\_booklet](http://bit.ly/dpp_booklet)

### **Use the correct tone with warnings**

If you have to give a warning, you can still be clear and direct while using an appropriate tone. Use firm language such as:

- If you continue to..., we will have to...;
- We will not..., unless you...; or
- If you fail to..., we may have to....

## Writing: vocabulary and style

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Your writing should aim to communicate clearly to the reader. Remember your reader often does not have the time, patience or perhaps skill to tease out the implications of what you are saying.

### Use everyday words

**Avoid formal and complicated words** wherever possible. Readers prefer familiar language.

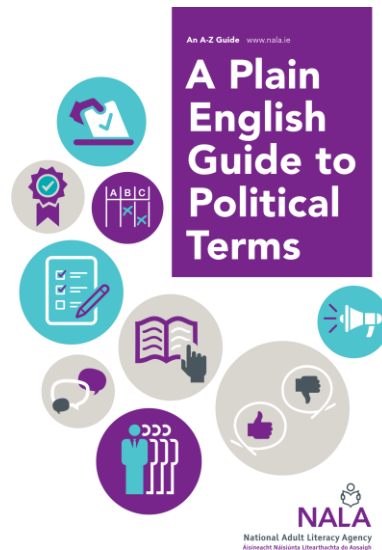
Instead of	Write
accompany	join
ascertain	find out
commence	start
endeavour	try
consequently	so

**Use everyday words** when writing letters, reports and other documents.

Instead of	Write
We write to acknowledge receipt of your letter date...	Thank you for your letter dated
With reference to your earlier enquiry with regard to...	I am writing in reply to your enquiry about ...

If a document must contain specialised language, **include definitions.**

Here is a 2016 example of a plain English guide to political terms which defines specialist political terms. You can download this and other plain English guides to specialist terms on [simplyput.ie/useful-downloads](http://simplyput.ie/useful-downloads)



Here is an extract from NALA's Plain English Guide to Financial terms. You can see how you could develop your own plain English glossary.

#### GNP

Gross National Product – the value of goods and services produced by a country, including those sold abroad

#### Gross

The total amount, before fees or taxes are taken off

#### Gross interest

The total interest on savings before any tax is taken off

#### Gross pay

Total pay before income tax, PRSI or pension payments are taken off

#### Gross profit

Total profit made from selling goods and services after the cost of producing them

#### Guarantee

A contract to pay someone's debt if they don't pay it

#### Guaranteed interest rate

An interest rate that a person can be sure they will receive on particular savings

#### Guarantor

A person who agrees to pay the loan if the person who received the loan fails to pay

## Hh

#### Hedge fund

A private investment fund that is open to a limited range of very wealthy investors and is allowed to make more risky and short-term investments than other funds to earn as much as possible

#### Health insurance

A form of insurance that pays for medical expenses

#### Hire purchase

A way to buy goods that involves getting them straight away but making regular payments for them over a fixed period of time

#### Home insurance

A type of insurance that covers either the property or its contents from theft, fire, flooding or other damage

## Be careful with jargon

Avoid jargon. While you may know what a word means, your readers may not. (See Everyday words.) If you use unfamiliar words, explain them as you go along. If this clutters up your text, put the explanations in a glossary. Use the same terms consistently.

Did you know that Britain's civil servants have been banned from using jargon? Their online style guide says that it is **unacceptable** to use certain terms such as the ones listed here.

- Slimming down (processes don't diet)
- Foster (unless it is children)
- Agenda (unless it is for a meeting)
- Deliver (pizzas, post and services are delivered – not abstract concepts like 'improvements' or 'priorities')
- Deploy (unless it is the military or software)
- Going forward
- Tackling (unless it is rugby, football or some other sport)

## Write 'actively' by using the active voice

Try to use the active voice most of the time in your writing. This means you begin by saying **who is doing the action** followed by **the action** (the verb) and then **what is being done** (the object).

### Example

Our manager has organised the meeting.

In the passive voice, the order is reversed. First is **what is being done** (the object), then **the action** (verb) and, last, **who is doing the action**. Sometimes who is doing the action is left out.

### Example

The meeting was organised by our manager.

The meeting was organised.

Here are some more examples of active and passive sentences.

Active	Passive
We will pay these benefits.	These benefits will be paid (by us).
The solicitor drafted the contract.	The letter was drafted by the solicitor.
The committee will conduct an audit.	An audit will be conducted by the committee.

Use the active voice about **80% of the time** to make sentences more direct.

Here are some situations when the passive voice can be useful.

Use the passive voice when	Example
Subject is unknown so you can't mention them	Concerns were raised about pollution levels.
Subject is already obvious	The murderer was arrested.
Subject is not the main actor	A helpline is run by volunteers.
It works better in terms of tone	Your supply will be cut off. (as opposed to: We will cut off your supply.)



For a good example of active writing, have a look at the Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021. It is divided into six chapters, and each chapter contains a Plain English summary accredited by NALA.

It is the first county development plan in the country to receive this accreditation. In 2016, it won a top Irish Planning Authority award in part because of the plain English summaries.

The plan is available on [www.longfordcoco.ie](http://www.longfordcoco.ie)



## Avoid abstract nouns

Abstract nouns originally come from verbs. You should avoid them. You can usually tell from its ending when a noun has come from a verb. These types of nouns often end with:

- ...ance or ...ence,
- ...tion or ...sion,
- ...ment, and
- ...al.

Here are some examples of abstract nouns and the verb you should use instead.

Instead of	Write
appearance	appear
consideration	consider
development	develop
discussion	discuss
renewal	renew

To convert nouns into verbs, you will often need to rephrase things, but doing so will make your sentences more active and direct.

### Example

**Before:** Consideration will be given by the manager to all requests relating to the renewal of licences.

**After:** The manager will consider all requests about renewing licences.

## Be concise

**Keep sentences to 15 to 20 words** on average – this helps readers to retain information. A good way to keep your sentences shorter is to **avoid wordy phrases**.

Here are some examples of wordy phrases and what to replace them with.

Instead of	Write
in reference to	about
in the event that	if
under the provisions of	under, according to
in view of the fact that	because
with regard to	about

We often start sentences with a lot of extra words. Here are some examples and what to write instead.

Instead of	Write
This aim of this briefing paper is to inform	This briefing paper informs
The department is in the process of compiling	The department is compiling
It is the committee's recommendation that	The committee recommends that
These findings give confidence to the view that	These findings support

Remember to use a mix of sentence lengths in your documents. Documents written entirely using either short – or long – sentences exclusively are boring to read. For long sentences, make sure you punctuate your sentences correctly and consider using bullet points.

## Be direct

Use 'I', 'we' and 'you' in documents, where possible. They help the reader to feel considered and involved.

Instead of	Write
Employer, employee, householder...	you
DES, the Department	we
DPER's...	our

## Write positively

Make your writing positive. Say what you **want** the reader to do as opposed to what you don't want them to do.

Instead of	Write
You must not send in your form later than 1 April 2017.	Please send in your form by 1 April 2017.
The strategy will not lead to a reduction of existing core services.	The strategy will safeguard existing core services.
If you do not sign this consent form, we will not be able to start treatments.	Please sign this consent form so that we can begin treatments.

## Use inclusive language

Guideline	Instead of	Write
Rewrite sentences to avoid using 'he' to mean all genders and to avoid 'he or she'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All applicants must submit his or her forms on time.</li> <li>• Each applicant must submit his photo identification.</li> <li>• The chairman bowed when the audience gave her a standing ovation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All applicants must submit their forms on time.</li> <li>• Each applicant must submit photo identification.</li> <li>• The chairperson bowed when the audience gave her a standing ovation.</li> </ul>
To describe an ethnic group, use the term that group prefers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies for itinerants have changed over time.</li> <li>• Migrants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies for Travellers have changed over time.</li> <li>• Policies for members of the Traveller Community have changed over time.</li> <li>• Non-Irish nationals</li> </ul>
To describe people with disabilities, focus on the person, not the disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the disabled</li> <li>• suffers from, afflicted by</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• person (people) with a disability</li> <li>• has, with</li> </ul>
Use inclusive terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the elderly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• older people</li> </ul>

## Avoid foreign words

Replace Latin or French terms with their English equivalent.

Foreign terms	English equivalent
ad hoc	for a specific purpose, informal
ad infinitum	without limit, endlessly
impasse	standstill, deadlock
in lieu of	instead of
inter alia	among others
per annum	a year
per capita	a person
vis-à-vis	about, in relation to
eg, e.g.	for example
ie, i.e.	that is
etc (et cetera)	omit it or phrase the sentence differently

## Use tables and examples to clearly explain financial information

When it is presented in a paragraph, financial information can be very difficult to understand. Consider using tables and examples along with or in place of paragraphs of text about financial information.

A good example of this is a tenant information booklet that the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (now the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government) produced. This booklet, which is a good example of how you use tables and questions and answers, explained money and discounts to people interested in the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme 2016. Here is an extract.

Tenants (Incremental) Purchase Scheme  
February 2016

### 13. What discount will I get?

Depending on your gross annual income, the discounts will vary between 40% and 60%. The discount will be given against the market value (purchase price) of your house.

Gross annual income	Discount
Between €15,000 and €20,000	60%
Between €20,001 and €29,999	50%
€30,000 or more	40%

#### Example:

If your local authority house is valued at €150,000 and your gross annual income is €18,000, you will get a discount of 60% against the purchase price. This means you will pay €60,000 for the house (40% of €150,000 is €60,000).

However, the local authority will place an incremental purchase charge on the house equal to the discount you get.

### 14. What is the incremental purchase charge?

One of the conditions of the sale is that your local authority will place an incremental purchase charge on the house equal to the value of the discount you get. This charge will reduce to zero over 20, 25 or 30 years (called the 'charge period'), as long as you obey the conditions of the sale under the scheme.

# Writing Web Content



When writing for the web, the style conventions in this guide apply, but there are some additional guidelines (see Checklist for Writing for the Web). The most important guideline is to write even more concisely than you do for print.

## How readers read online

When we read a printed page, we read from top to bottom, left to right. Online, our reading behaviour is different. We don't really read webpages. We scan them. Typically, we follow an F-shaped pattern when we scan text online. We:

- first read across the top of the page,
- then we read horizontally across the middle of the page, and
- then we scan the text on the left hand side.

When we write for the web, we need to consider this behaviour when we decide how to structure our information.

## Examples of good writing online

In mid-2014, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (now the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment) began a project to make its web content more understandable and accessible to the general public. Since then it has used a variety of strategies including a technology-scoring tool. In 2016, it has trained up to 80 of its personnel how to write in plain English and or how to write for the web. They used their own web content during the training and will apply what they have learned in the coming months.

Web address: [www.dccae.gov.ie](http://www.dccae.gov.ie)

The Department of Foreign Affairs also has an attractive home page.

Web address: [www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie)



## Write web links that encourage action

When writing web content, 'call to action' links can be better than simple instructions such as 'click here' and 'read more'. It depends on who your user is and what you want them to know or do.

Examples of **call to action** links include '**Fill in the request form**', '**Download the form**' and '**Talk to one of our advisers**'. These call to actions are more helpful for people trying to use services.

Always use short, clear descriptive links that will help your readers complete their task. Ideally, use 2-5 words.

# Writing: capitalisation, grammar and punctuation

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

Use acronyms and abbreviations sparingly. When you do use them, follow these guidelines.

- Write the full version of the phrase the first time.
- Depending on the length of the document, alternate the full version with the acronym as an aid to the reader. For example, in a long document, the first time a phrase appears in each chapter, write it out and put the acronym or abbreviation in brackets.
- **Leave out full stops and spaces between and after letters.**

	Instead of	Write
Acronym	D.A.R.T., N.A.L.A., N.A.M.A.	DART, NALA, NAMA
Abbreviation	Dr., Prof., a.m., Co., Ltd.	Dr, Prof, am, Co, Ltd
Initialism	E.U. U.S., U.K., E.T.B.	EU, US, UK, ETB

## Capital letters

In general, capitalise the names of organisations, government departments and associations.

Example	Short version of the name
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education	The Committee
Department of Education and Skills	The Department
The Government... (only for Ireland)	The Government (of Ireland)

Do not capitalise 'the' before a name unless it is at the start of a sentence.

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Write</b>
She works in The Department of Education and Skills.	She works in the Department of Education and Skills.

The names of jobs, public offices or organisations can be titles or descriptions. If it is a title, use capitals. If it is a description, use lowercase letters.

	<b>Example</b>
A job title that is a title	Mark Mahon, Area Manager, won the award.
A job title that is a description	Mark Mahon has been an area manager with the company for eight years.
A public office title that is a title	The Taoiseach attended the conference in Paris.
A public office title that is a description	Bertie Ahern, former taoiseach, attended the conference in Paris.

Here are some more examples.

<b>When to start with a capital</b>	<b>When to use lower case</b>
Longford County Council	Contact your local county council.
Mary Murphy, Managing Director	The managing director is on leave.
National Safety Conference	The conference was cancelled.

Do **not** use capital letters for common or collective nouns. A common or collective noun is a word that denotes a group of people or objects.

Instead of	Write
All the Governments of South American countries sent a representative to the conference.	All the governments of South American countries sent a representative to the conference.
There are 20 Departments in the company.	There are 20 departments in the company.
The Committee meets weekly.	The committee meets weekly.
Every Member must pay their membership on time.	Every member must pay their membership on time.

### Capitals in headings

Put all headings in documents in sentence case.

Instead of	Write
Checklist for Clear Writing	Checklist for clear writing

## Numbers, currency, dates and time

### Symbols, punctuation and currency

Guideline	Instead of	Write
After a decimal point, use two digits <b>unless</b> the precision is required	€40.562	€40.56
Avoid using a comma to separate euro and cent.	€40,56	€40.56
Use the correct currency symbol	E40 or Euro 40	€40
Use currency codes in a document that mentions multiple currencies	\$382,000 (Canada)	CAD 382,000

## Dates

Always use the same style for dates. The table shows our preferred style.

Instead of	Write
29th January 2018 January 29th 2018 January 29 2018	29 January 2018 (date month year – no commas)
1 to 3 December	1-3 December (use a hyphen when writing a range of dates)

## Measures and quantities

Use these abbreviations for common length and distance units.

Unit	Abbreviation	Write
millimetre	mm	75 mm
centimetre	cm	75 cm
metre	m	75 m
kilometre	km	75 km
square metre	sq m	75 sq m
square kilometre	sq km	75 sq km
hectare	Do not use an abbreviation	75 hectares
kilometres per hour	km/h	75 km/h

Leave a space between the number and the abbreviation. If you need to include imperial equivalents, put them in brackets.

### Example

75 sq m (807 sq ft)

85 g (3 oz)

## Numbers

Number	Write
1-9 in descriptive text.	Words: one, two, ...nine  Example: Only five people applied for the job.
1-9 in instructions	Numbers: 1, 2, ... 9  Example: Eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day.
From 10 up	Write figures, not words <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10 chairs</li><li>• 385 polling stations</li></ul>
From 1,000 up	Use commas <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 5,671 citizens</li><li>• 1,270,089 voters</li></ul>
Million and billion	Write the figure followed by the word <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 575 million people</li><li>• €4 billion</li></ul>

## Decimals

Guideline	Write
Round to one decimal place, if possible. If not, round to two decimal places.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1.1</li><li>• 1.15</li></ul>
In currency, after the decimal point, use two digits <b>unless</b> the precision is required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• €40.56</li></ul>
If a value is less than one, put a zero before the decimal point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 0.75</li></ul>

## Fractions

Use fractions for approximate values only.

### Examples

- One half of the population is female. (This is exact, so do not use a fraction.)
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of applicants were successful. (This is not exact, so include the fraction to show the exact number.)

## Percentages

Write the percentage symbol (%), not the word 'percent' or 'percentage'. Write percentages with digits, not words.

Replace percentages with a fraction if you can.

Instead of	Write
25%, 33%, 50% or 75%	a quarter, a third, half or three quarters

Treat the percentage as singular or plural according to the subject of the sentence.

### Examples

- You will get 60% of your payment in year one.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of applicants were successful.
- People are fairly content at work – half of respondents say they do not plan to change jobs in the next six months.

## Numbers at the start of a sentence

Guideline	Example
If a sentence starts with a number, write the number in words.	Ten countries share fifth place in the list of popular destinations.
If the number at the start of a sentence has two digits and is over 20, insert a hyphen.	Thirty-three places have recorded...
If the number has three or more digits, don't use hyphens	Three hundred people attended the lecture.
Avoid starting sentences with large numbers.	A total of 727,354 votes were cast.

## Phone numbers

Guideline	Example
For <b>area codes</b> , write the area code in brackets before the local number.	(043) 45211
For <b>numbers that have more than 5 digits</b> , divide the digits into groups of two, three or four and leave a space between them.	(01) 704 3000
For <b>freephone or LoCall numbers</b> , divide the digits in a way that is easy to remember.	LoCall 1890 20 20 65 LoCall 1890 690 690
For <b>numbers that are likely to be called from overseas</b> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• put +353 at the start, and</li><li>• do not put brackets around the area code.</li></ul>	+353 1 776 5544 +353 21 415 3697

## Time

Use am and pm (9am and 9pm). Avoid the 24-hour format.



## Plural and singular

**Singular** means there is only one: house or woman.

**Plural** means there is more than one: houses or women.

The verb must agree with the noun.

Singular	Plural
The house is old.	The houses are old.
The woman is on the waiting list.	The women are on the waiting list.

### Singular form of verbs

Treat named organisations as singular.

Instead of	Write
The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform examine...	The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform examines...

### Singular or plural for collective nouns

**Collective nouns** – which identify groups of people or things – can be singular or plural. Whether you use the singular or plural verb for a collective noun depends on the context.

Guideline	Example
When you refer to a group as one unit, use a singular verb.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform publishes...</li><li>• The team provides round-the-clock care.</li><li>• The crew reports to the skipper.</li></ul>
When you focus on the individuals in a group, use a plural verb.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The committee are divided on who should be the next chairperson.</li><li>• The panel have chosen the same candidate for the job.</li></ul>

## Forming plurals of numbers and abbreviations

Avoid using apostrophes when writing plurals.

Instead of	Write
TD's are...	TDs are...
In the 1980's	In the 1980s
The meeting included CEO's from...	The meeting included CEOs from...

## Punctuation

### Apostrophes

Guideline	Example
Use apostrophes <b>to show that letters are missing in contractions</b> (words formed by joining two words together and leaving out some letters).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't forget to send the guide.</li><li>• It's too late to register.</li><li>• You're welcome.</li></ul>
Use apostrophes to <b>show possession</b> (that someone or something owns something else.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students' needs</li><li>• Women's rights / Children's rights</li><li>• Three weeks' work</li></ul>

Writers often aren't sure whether to use an apostrophe with a period of time, as in the example **three weeks' work**. If you can use 'of' instead of the apostrophe and the phrase still makes sense, you should use the apostrophe. Of course, you can also use the phrase with 'of'.

### Examples

To finish the report, we have three weeks' work to do. (use the apostrophe)

To finish the report, we have three weeks **of** work to do. (because you've used 'of', you don't need to use an apostrophe)

## Apostrophes: using 'it's' and 'its' correctly.

There are two very simple rules for helping you decide whether to write **it's** or **its**.

Rule	Example
It's = it is or it has	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>It's</b> a crazy world.</li><li>• <b>It's</b> a great achievement.</li><li>• Don't give out that form because <b>it's</b> out of date.</li></ul>
Its = possession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Has your food lost <b>its</b> flavour?</li><li>• <b>Its</b> layout is clear.</li><li>• I can't use my phone because I've lost <b>its</b> charger.</li></ul>

## Colons

Use colons to introduce lists. (See Lists.)

## Semicolons

Use semicolons to separate items in a bulleted list. (See Lists.)

## Commas

Use commas to separate words or groups of words to make your writing clearer.

## Separating items in a list

Use commas after each item in a simple list **except** after the second-last item.

### Example

Please send your application form, proof of your address, a copy of your passport and a tax clearance certificate.

If a list item includes the word 'and', you might have to use a comma after the second-last item to make the sentence clear. This is often called the **Oxford comma**.

### Example

We are reviewing our policies on purchasing, health and safety, and risk management.

Those attending the conference will have a chance to meet President Higgins, a clay-pipe maker, and a collector of butter churns.

In the second example, if you leave out the Oxford comma, the sentence becomes unclear – it sounds like President Higgins is a clay-pipe maker who collects butter churns. Using the Oxford comma makes it clear that we are talking about three people.

### Use commas in pairs for non-essential information

**Non-essential information** is information that you can take out of a sentence and not change the meaning of the sentence.

### Example

If you cannot work, for example because you are sick or disabled, you may be able to claim support.

If you cannot work, you may be able to claim support.

In the example, both sentences are correctly punctuated and use good grammar. You must use a comma **before** and **after** the non-essential information.

### Use a comma before the conjunctions for, and, nor, but, or, yet and so when they start a complete thought in a sentence.

### Example

Most of the places are filled, but we expect some cancellations.

### When you refer to a group of people or things, use a comma before 'who' or 'which'.

### Example

The rules apply to all banks, which are regulated by the Financial Regulator.

**Use a comma to separate an introductory word or phrase from the rest of the sentence.**

**Example**

Most importantly, applicants should sign and date the form.

First, make sure you fill in the form correctly.

**Full stops**

Do not use full stops after abbreviations unless the abbreviation is at the end of a sentence. (See also Abbreviations and acronyms.)

**Hyphens**

**Use hyphens between closely related words when together they form an adjective and the noun comes directly afterwards.**

**Example**

part-time work      two-monthly billing period      means-tested payment

**Use hyphens for certain prefixes to avoid awkward-looking words and to distinguish between meanings of similar words.**

**Example**

Write co-ordinate instead of coordinate

Write co-operate instead of cooperate

Write reform instead of re-form

**Omit the hyphen from the word 'email'**

Omit hyphen from the word 'email'.

**Quotation marks**

**Use double quotation marks for speech.**

**Example**

"This policy will raise living standards," the Minister said.

**Use single quotation marks the first time you use specific terms. Drop them afterwards.**

**Example**

You can get credited contributions or 'credits'. These credits help to protect your right to future social welfare benefits.

**Use single quotation marks for quotes within quotes.**

**Example**

The reporter said, "The Minister announced that she was going to resign 'with immediate effect'."

**If you are quoting a phrase, not a sentence, start the quote with a small letter and end the sentence with a full stop outside the quotation marks.**

**Example**

The Minister said she was "extremely impressed" by the enthusiasm of delegates and that it was "very important to continue promoting literacy awareness among diverse groups".

**& and /**

Replace '&' and '/' with words.

**Example**

Review & evaluation should be 'Review and evaluation'.

**and/or**

Use 'or' when only one option applies, not both options.

Instead of	Write
Tell us if your sister and/or brother qualify for this scheme.	Tell us if your sister or brother qualifies for this scheme.

**Spelling**

Use the Oxford dictionary as your guide to spelling. However, please note that you should use -ise spellings (example: organise not organize).

## Syntax (word order)

**Syntax** is about how you arrange the words in your sentences to achieve clarity.

### Example

I nearly drove for six hours straight.

The writer probably means to say that they drove for six hours. But 'nearly' is modifying the verb 'drove'. I 'nearly' drove means I didn't actually drive at all. 'Nearly' needs to be moved to after the word 'for' so that the sentence reads "I drove for nearly six hours straight".

## Titles

Rule	Example
Put main titles in title case, with each main word starting with a capital letter.	I saw Prime Time last night.
Use italics for titles of publications, books and so on.	The leaflet <i>Know Your Rights</i> is available now.
Use single quotes for chapter titles.	In the chapter 'Adult Development' in <i>Psychology and Adult Learning...</i>
Describe ministers by their ministerial title only. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not use Mr, Mrs or Ms.</li></ul>	Minister for Finance Michael Noonan presented Budget 2017...
Include TD when writing a letter to a Minister.	Michael Noonan TD, Minister for Finance, Government Buildings...
Use initial capitals for the ministerial titles of current office holders.	Minister for Finance Michael Noonan presented Budget 2017...
There is no need to add TD unless it is relevant to the context of the sentence.	Minister for Finance Michael Noonan TD was absent for the vote.
Use lowercase letters for the ministerial titles of former office holders.	Richie Ryan was minister for finance for four years in the 1970s.
For TDs, put their title after their name. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not use Mr, Mrs or Ms.</li><li>Do not use punctuation.</li></ul>	Niall Collins TD

## Lists

Lists help people read, understand and act on information more easily. But lists that are inconsistent in structure and formatting do the opposite.

There are three styles of list to consider.

- A list that is one complete sentence
- A list of phrases
- A numbered list

### **A list that is one complete sentence**

There are two ways to present a list that is a complete sentence.

- If the items are single words or short phrases with no internal punctuation, use commas at the end of each list item.
- If the items are lengthy or contain punctuation marks, use semicolons at the end of each list item.

Here are the complete rules for this kind of list presented in a list. This is an example of **a list with commas**.

#### **Example**

If list items are part of a sentence:

- end the introduction to the list with a colon,
- start each item in the list on a new line,
- start each item with a small letter,
- separate the list items with semicolons or commas,
- include 'or' or 'and' after the second last item, and
- end the list with a full stop.



Here is an example of a **list with semicolons**.

### **Example**

You should use a semicolon at the end of list items if list items:

- include punctuation such as commas, semicolons or dashes;
- are very long because they contain a lot of information that needs to be there;  
and
- can't be broken up or rewritten into shorter sentences or smaller lists.

### **A list of phrases**

If your list contains phrases, do not use punctuation in the list after the introduction or the list items.

### **Example**

Other sources of fatty acids

- Meat, poultry and eggs
- Seeds such as sunflower and pumpkin
- Vegetables
- Wholegrain breads and breakfast cereals

## A numbered list

Only use a numbered list when the order of items is important. Use this list for instructions. Write each list item as a complete sentence and end it with a full stop.

### Example

Five steps for assessing risks in the workplace

1. Identify the hazards.
2. Decide who might be harmed and how.
3. Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions.
4. Record your findings and implement them.
5. Review your assessment and update it if necessary.

## Selecting a list style

Complete sentence with comma separators	Complete sentence with semicolon separators	Phrases
Your first aid kit should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• scissors,</li><li>• plasters,</li><li>• antiseptic spray, and</li><li>• bandages.</li></ul>	Your first aid kit should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• scissors, which should be clean, dry and well maintained;</li><li>• plasters, preferably of different sizes and shapes;</li><li>• antiseptic spray or, if preferred, an antiseptic cream; and</li><li>• bandages, which should be in an easy-to-open, sterile package.</li></ul>	First aid contents <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Scissors</li><li>• A variety of plasters</li><li>• Antiseptic spray or cream</li><li>• Bandages</li></ul>

There is no example of a numbered list here because the order of the items is not important.

## **Keeping lists short and clear**

Keep your lists short. Use no more than 5-10 items in a list.

If you have more items than the recommended number, consider whether you actually have more than one list. Try to group similar items and create shorter lists that are introduced with subheadings.

## Design

---

Plain English is not just about words. It is also about the way we put the words on paper or how they appear on a computer screen to help your information look well and make it easier to read. Here are some general tips on design and layout.

### Keep text left aligned

Align your text to the left. It makes your information easier to read.

Left-aligned text	Justified text	Centred text
This text is aligned to the left margin. It has a ragged right margin. This style is the easiest to read.	This text is justified. This means it is aligned to the left and right margins. This style makes the spaces between words uneven and can create large white gaps. Avoid this style.	This text is centred. The left and right margins are ragged. Avoid this style.

## Use a clear font

The table shows you the ideal font and point-size choices for each element of your document.

Part of the document	Guideline
Overall font choice	Use a sans serif font for headings and body text. Arial or Verdana are good choices. This style guide uses Verdana.
Point size for body text (print and web)	Use 12 point. In some cases, you might need to use 11 point text.
Point size for headings (print and web)	Use a size two points larger than the body text. If the body text is 12 point, use 14 point for the headings.
Point size for subheadings (print and web)	Use the same size as the body text, but make it bold.
Number of heading sizes	Try to use no more than three heading sizes. Sometimes longer documents require more headings sizes. For example, this style guide uses four heading sizes.

## Be careful with forms

Develop forms in line with NALA's Plain English Checklist for forms, which is in the appendix.

The Medical Card and GP Visit Card Application Form – People Aged 70 Years or Older complies with many of the guidelines for writing forms in plain English. You can view the form at:

[http://bit.ly/medical\\_card\\_over\\_70s](http://bit.ly/medical_card_over_70s)

The image shows a sample of the Medical Card and GP Visit Card Application Form for people aged 70 or older. The form is titled 'Medical Card and GP Visit Card Application Form - People Aged 70 Years or Older MC1(a)'. It includes the Health Service Executive (HSE) logo and the text 'Teidlmeasmacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte Health Service Executive'. The form is divided into several sections with green headers: 'Who should use this form?', 'How do I apply for a Persons Aged 70 Years or Older Medical Card or GP Visit Card?', 'What can I do to avoid delaying the process?', 'Need help?', and 'Help and information'. The 'How do I apply' section lists six steps: 1. Complete this form, 2. Include all documents, 3. Read and sign the declaration, 4. Ask your doctor to complete Part 5A, 5. Read and tick the checklist, and 6. Send the completed form to the Client Registration Unit. The 'What can I do to avoid delaying the process?' section lists three points: take care to fill in all details correctly, include copies of all documents, and make sure documents are up to date. The 'Need help?' section provides a phone number (1890 252 919) and a website (www.hse.ie) for further assistance. The 'Help and information' section explains who can apply for a Medical Card or GP Visit Card, stating that anyone who is 'ordinarily resident' in the Republic of Ireland can apply.

## Keep your paragraphs short

Follow these guidelines to keep your paragraphs short.

- Try to start and end a paragraph on the same page.
- Use 1.5 line spacing where possible.
- Have five lines or fewer in each paragraph.
- Make sure paragraphs are no longer than their width. If it is, you'll produce blocks of text that are off-putting to read.
- Keep your **first** paragraph (and sentence) short.

## Create clear, easy to read emphasis with bold text

Writers often use bold, italics or underlining to create emphasis. Italics and underlining can make text more difficult to read, so use only bold for emphasis. Follow these guidelines to make your emphatic text easy to read and understand.

- Use bold, **sparingly**, to emphasise words.
- Avoid PUTTING COMPLETE WORDS IN CAPITAL LETTERS.
- Avoid underlining.
- Use italics only for specific references – for example, book titles.

Instead of	Write
IMPORTANT	Important
Make sure you give <i>all</i> details.	Make sure you give <b>all</b> details.
It will take five months to reply.	It will take <b>five months</b> to reply.

## Use the frequently asked questions (FAQs) format

People often use FAQs to help make information more accessible, especially legal information or instructions. FAQs also work very well on websites.

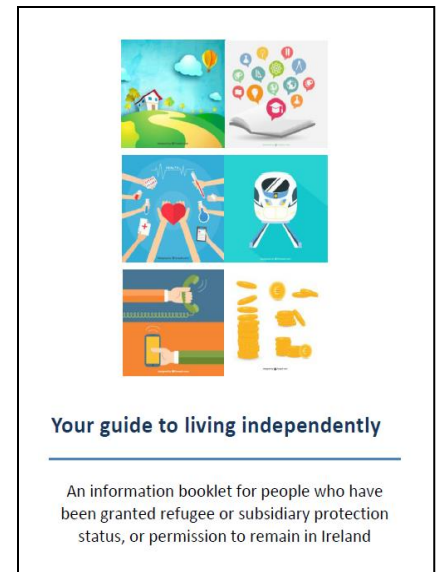
If you think a FAQ format will work for your document, try to anticipate the questions your reader would ask and work from there. If you have lots of questions, group them under logical headings.

### An example of the FAQ format

The cover image here is from a 2016 information booklet prepared by the Department of Justice and Equality with the assistance of NALA. The booklet is for people who have been granted refugee or subsidiary protection status, or permission to remain in Ireland. Some of the text uses a question and answer approach to providing information.

You can download the full document from this link:

[http://bit.ly/guide\\_to\\_independent\\_living](http://bit.ly/guide_to_independent_living)



## Use meaningful headings

Meaningful headings help readers find information more quickly.

## Use visuals: pictures, photos, charts and graphs

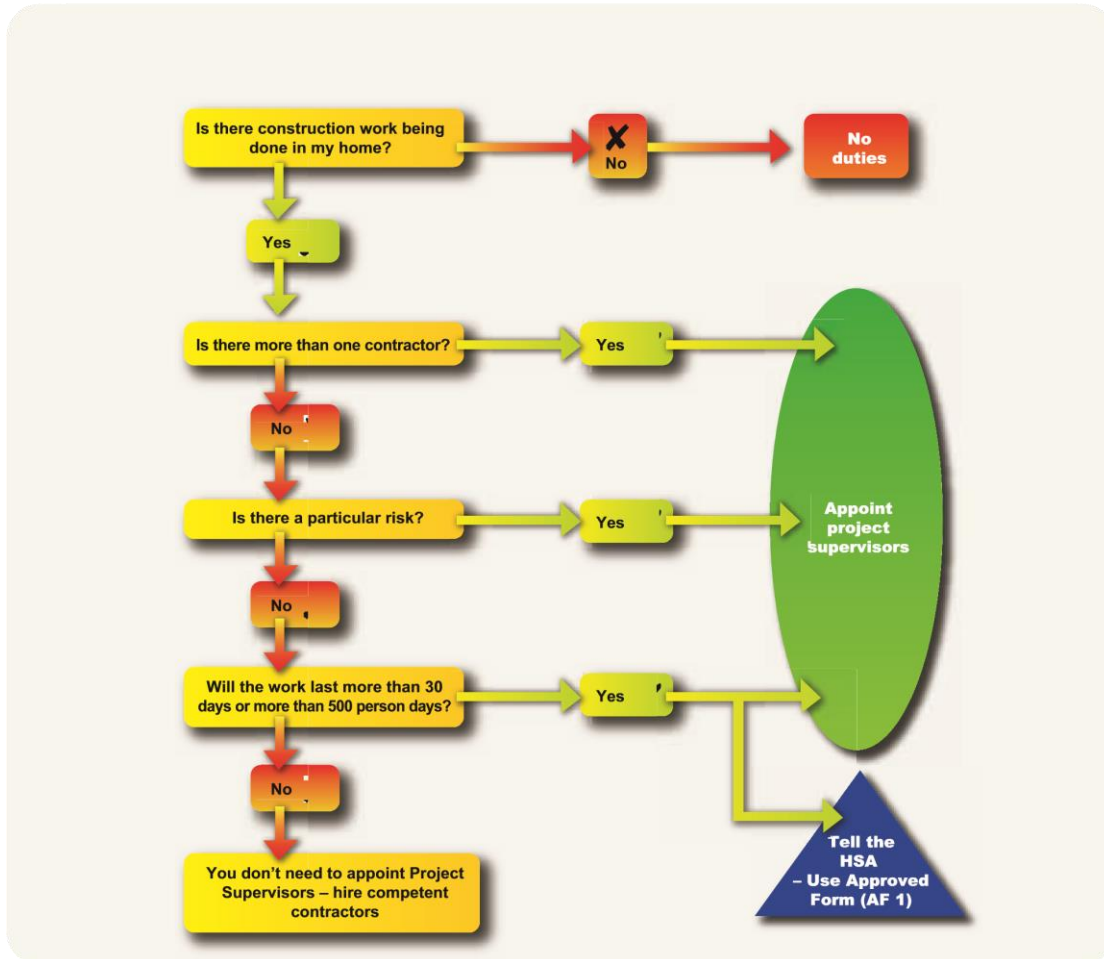
Use picture, photos, charts and graphs that help make your information clearer. On the web, all visuals should have clear written descriptions, which are called **alt tags**.

Include names of people in photos and put the names in the correct order.

Use infographics (a picture or diagram that explains information) and tables to display statistical or numbers-based information such as research findings.

Algorithms are also useful. The following is an example of an algorithm in the Health and Safety Authority's 'Guide for Homeowners: Getting Construction Work done Safely' (2013).

### Summary of what you have to do



## Be careful about copyright issues

Make sure that you have permission to use any text, images or sounds that have been created by someone else.

## Test what you have written

It is always a good idea to have another person review a document. Ask a colleague to review it for you. If you work in a team, include a review phase in your project plan.



For documents that are for large numbers of people (application forms, brochures, consent forms, and so on), try to test them with their intended readers before you release them. Gather some people who represent the audience of the document, have them read it, and get their feedback on organisation, format, clarity, and overall ease of reading.

## We welcome your comments

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Is this guidance clear? Do you know of better examples? Has anything important been left out? What could we do to improve this guide?

We welcome your comments on this style guide. Please email any comments to [reformoffice@per.gov.ie](mailto:reformoffice@per.gov.ie)

In the meantime, you might also find the information in the appendices useful. They contain writing checklists for documents, numbers, web content and much more.

# Appendix 1: Plain English Checklists

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## Checklist for documents

		Yes	No
<b>Written text</b>			
<b>1</b>	Does the document use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2</b>	Does it use the active voice most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3</b>	Does it keep technical terms and abbreviations to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4</b>	Does it define any necessary terms and abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5</b>	Does it keep 'corporate jargon' to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6</b>	Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>7</b>	Does it use the same term for the same concept throughout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>8</b>	Does it have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>9</b>	Does it use correct punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Structure</b>			
<b>10</b>	Does it use informative headings or questions to break up text?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>11</b>	Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>12</b>	Are paragraphs relatively short?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>13</b>	Does it use bullet point lists for detailed or complicated information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Page design</b>			
<b>14</b>	Is the font size at least 12 point or ideally 14 point?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>15</b>	Is the font type clear?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>16</b>	Is text aligned to the left?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>17</b>	Is text 1.5 spaced?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>18</b>	Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>19</b>	Are images, charts or blocks of colour, if any, clear and relevant?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>20</b>	Does the text contrast effectively with the background?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Checklist for forms

		Yes	No
<b>Language, punctuation and grammar</b>			
<b>1</b>	Does the form use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2</b>	Are most questions in the active voice?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3</b>	Are questions written clearly and unambiguous?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4</b>	Does the form define any specialised terms or abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5</b>	Does the form avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6</b>	Are questions punctuated correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>7</b>	Do similar questions use similar words and punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>8</b>	Do questions use the simplest verb tense possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>9</b>	Do questions avoid abstract nouns?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Structure</b>			
<b>10</b>	Does the form include clear instructions ideally at the start?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>11</b>	Are 'official use only' sections, if any, near the end of the form?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>12</b>	Does the form ask questions in a logical order?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>13</b>	Does it avoid unnecessary or repeated questions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>14</b>	Does it group similar questions together under useful headings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>15</b>	Does it keep numbering as simple as possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Page design</b>			
<b>16</b>	Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>17</b>	Does the form use a typeface (font) that is easy to read?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>18</b>	Is it clear where to give answers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>19</b>	Is there enough space for answers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>20</b>	Does the form use tick-the-box questions where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Checklist for plain numbers

		Yes	No
<b>Assumptions</b>			
1	Are you clear about the meaning of the numbers you are presenting?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Are you clear about what your audience needs to understand?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Have you considered the barriers to their understanding?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Conventions and consistency</b>			
4	Have you been consistent in the way you have written units of measure, time, decimals, percentages, fractions, language and so on?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Have you used plain words to describe specialist terms and phrases?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Where possible, have you written numbers one to nine in words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Where a sentence starts with a number, have you written it in words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	When using percents, have you used the percentage symbol (%)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Have you written percents with digits? For example, 20%	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Format and layout in tables, graphs and charts</b>			
10	Have you used a simple format for presenting your numbers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Are columns and rows ordered by size?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Are the numbers compared by columns and not rows?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	Have you aligned numbers and column headings to the right?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14	Do your tables, charts and graphs use information headings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15	If using axes, is the scale clear?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Integrity of numbers</b>			
16	Has your presentation of numbers kept their meaning?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17	Have you used clear examples to spell out what the numbers mean?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18	Have you put a clear link to your sources?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19	Have you been upfront about the age of your sources?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Checklist for plain speaking

Yes No

### You and your environment

- |   |  |                          |                          |
|---|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Is your body language appropriate for the message you are conveying? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | Have you kept background noise to a minimum?                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | Have you ensured that you do not have your back to a light source?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

### Your listener

- |   |  |                          |                          |
|---|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4 | Are you aware of their understanding of English, words, numbers?           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | Are you aware of their understanding of your topic?                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | If you are using visuals, are they relevant and familiar to your audience? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

### Delivering a clear message

- |    |   |                          |                          |
|----|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 7  | Have you stated the purpose of your conversation at the start?      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8  | Are you speaking clearly and in a way that suits your audience?     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9  | Have you kept your message simple with no more than four messages?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 | Have you used everyday language and explained necessary jargon?     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 | Have you encouraged questions?                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 | If using the phone, have you given a small number of clear options? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

### Checking understanding

- |    |   |                          |                          |
|----|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 13 | Have you specially trained staff to deal with people who need extra time? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14 | Did you check that the listener can tell you what they need to do?        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Checklist for websites<sup>1</sup>

		Yes	No
<b>Written text</b>			
<b>1</b>	Does it use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2</b>	Does it use the active voice most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3</b>	Does it keep technical terms and abbreviations to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4</b>	Does it define any necessary terms and abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5</b>	Does it keep 'corporate jargon' to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>6</b>	Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>7</b>	Does it use the same term for the same concept throughout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>8</b>	Does it have an average of 11 to 15 words in each sentence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>9</b>	If you have rewritten a document for a website, is it half the length of the printed document?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>10</b>	Does it use correct punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>11</b>	Does it use verbs to get people to take the action needed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>12</b>	Have you developed text for any videos on your site?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Structure</b>			
<b>13</b>	Does it use informative headings or questions for easy skimming?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>14</b>	Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>15</b>	Are your paragraphs on each page short and snappy with one idea in each paragraph?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>16</b>	Does it use bullet point lists for detailed or complicated information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>17</b>	Have you given the conclusion, or main message or research at the top of the text ('Above the fold')?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>18</b>	Are your links descriptive and specific? (see Links)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>19</b>	Have you written summaries of longer documents and provided a link to the full document?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the guidelines for writing for the web are similar to those of writing for documents.

## Page design

- |           |   |                          |                          |
|-----------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>20</b> | Is the font size at least 12 point or ideally 14 point? <sup>2</sup>  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>21</b> | Is the font type clear? (See Font)  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>22</b> | Is text aligned to the left?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>23</b> | Is text 1.5 spaced?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>24</b> | Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>25</b> | Have you bolded keywords?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>26</b> | Are images, charts or blocks of colour clear and relevant to the text?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>26</b> | Does it minimise the number of clicks needed for the reader to find the information they want?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>27</b> | Does the text contrast effectively with the background?<br>(Your website text should be in a colour that is easy to read and which contrasts strongly with the background, for example black or white.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>28</b> | Does each image have a caption?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please see the following page for additional points to bear in mind when writing online content.

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<sup>2</sup> Make sure that the font size is easy to read across different platforms.



## Appendix 2: Writing for the web – an overview in numbers

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These tips will help you create web content that keeps site visitors on your pages.

### Your readers

**You have five seconds to keep your reader's attention.**

**Aim for no more than three clicks for finding information – but the smoothness of the process is more important than the number of clicks.**

**On average, readers read about 18% of what is on the web page. Readers typically look at the first few words in a sentence or of a bulleted list.**

### Your text

**Use 12 or 14 point text.**

**Use no more than:**

- **six words in a heading;**
- **15 words in a sentence;**
- **30 words in your opening paragraph (two sentences);**
- **60 words in other paragraphs (two-four sentences);**
- **six sentences in a paragraph — and one-sentence paragraphs are fine;**
- **six paragraphs on a web page;**
- **600 words on a page;**
- **three or four words in a link;**
- **156 characters in an alt-text description, including spaces; and**
- **140 characters in Tweets.**

Remember that these numbers are **guidelines**. There will always be content that does not match these numbers exactly. The most important thing is that you **do what is best** for your reader.

## Appendix 3: Write consistent emails

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When writing emails to colleagues or other customers, please use the following tips.

- Use font size 11 with single line spacing. Set this in your email options and settings.
- Ensure you write a meaningful subject line which relates to the content of your mail. An example is 'Consultation response deadline 23 June 2017'. Amend the subject as appropriate if the content of the email changes.
- Avoid sending attachments. However, if there is a lot of content, instead of putting it in the body of the email you should attach it as a document instead.
- If you do have to send attachments, mention them in the text of the email. If there are several, list them in the text of the email. Attach the documents in the same order as the list.
- Write your mail in plain English.
- Use headings and bullet points to break up text into accessible sections.
- Keep the formatting simple to avoid it being distorted by the recipient's email programme.
- Spell check the email before sending it.
- Use the standard email sign off for your department or agency.

## Appendix 4: Useful resources

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### Resources:

Mc Govern, G, *Killer Web Content: Make the sale, deliver the service, build the brand*. London: A & C Black, 2006

National Disability Authority, *Universal Design Toolkit for Customer Engagement (Tourism): [3 Electronic & Web Based Communication](#)*, 2014

Redish, J, *Letting Go of the Words: Writing web content that works*. 2nd ed (Interactive Technologies series). Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2012.

### Websites:

#### Simply Put

This is NALA's website dedicated to all things plain English. It includes quick tips, lists of words and phrases to replace and much more. It also features information on NALA's services and updates on what is happening in plain English.

**Web address:** [www.simplyput.ie](http://www.simplyput.ie)

#### Breacadh

Breacadh is an Irish language resource unit of the Education and Training Boards. It provides support to the Gaeltacht regions. Their publication [Cuir Tú Féin in Iúl/Get your message across](#), provides helpful plain language tips for writing in Irish.

**Web address:** <http://www.breacadh.ie/>

## Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN)

Plain Language Association InterNational is an international non-profit organisation of plain language advocates and professionals. Their website provides free plain language articles, tutorials, news, networking opportunities and an e-mail discussion group.

**Web address:** [www.plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org)

## Clarity

Clarity is an international organisation of lawyers and interested lay people. It aims to have the legal profession use good, clear language by exerting a firm, responsible influence on the style of legal writing and encouraging professionals to avoid obscure, over-elaborate words in legal work. Back issues of its journal are available for download.

**Web address:** <http://www.clarity-international.net/>

## Health Promotion Information

A HSE website, Health Promotion Information contains information and guidance for writing and designing health promotion information. It also allows you to search for and order HSE health promotion publications.

**Web address:** [www.healthinfo.ie](http://www.healthinfo.ie)

## Health Literacy

Health Literacy includes tips and articles about how to communicate more clearly with patients and colleagues. It covers written, verbal and visual information.

**Web address:** <http://www.healthliteracy.com>

Plain English Guides:

NALA has developed a number of plain English guides to terms in different sectors. See below for a list of these guides.

**Citizenship terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain\\_english\\_guide\\_to\\_citizenship\\_terms.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain_english_guide_to_citizenship_terms.pdf)

**Environmental terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain\\_english\\_guide\\_to\\_environmental\\_terms.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain_english_guide_to_environmental_terms.pdf)

**Financial terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain\\_english\\_guide\\_to\\_financial\\_terms.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain_english_guide_to_financial_terms.pdf)

**Legal terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain\\_english\\_guide\\_to\\_legal\\_terms.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain_english_guide_to_legal_terms.pdf)

**Political terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain\\_english\\_guide\\_to\\_political\\_terms.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/plain_english_guide_to_political_terms.pdf)

**Social Services terms**

[http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/NALA\\_Plain\\_English\\_Guide\\_09\\_10.pdf](http://www.simplyput.ie/downloads/NALA_Plain_English_Guide_09_10.pdf)

## Simply Put.

## There are times when plain English works best

### Writing and design tips to make your documents easy to read

1. Think of the person you are writing to and why.
2. Be personal - don't be afraid to use 'we' for your organisation and 'you' for the reader.
3. Keep it simple and define any essential jargon and abbreviations.
4. Use a clear font such as Arial or Verdana and use 12 point as standard.
5. Keep sentences to an average of 15 to 20 words.

For more tips on plain English and for information on our plain English editing (including our Plain English Mark) and training service, please visit

[www.simplyput.ie](http://www.simplyput.ie)

