

Plain English

Clear, accessible, jargon-free language, that is understandable to all readers, in order to open up statistics to as wide an audience as possible.

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The [UK Statistics Authority standards](#) state plain English should be used:

Include an impartial narrative in plain English that draws out the main messages from the statistics

Avoid: Language that needs to be “translated” by journalists or commentators into simpler English.

Plain English is clear language, with no jargon, that is understood by all readers. This isn't “dumbing down” information, but opening up statistics and statistical commentary to everyone. Users don't stop understanding text because it's written clearly, but they stop understanding when it is complex.

Don't use formal or long words when easy or short ones will do. You can generally avoid this by breaking down what you are actually doing. Where technical terms can't be avoided, they should be explained in the text, not just in a footnote.

Find out more about [words to watch](#) and [words not to use](#).

To write in plain English, think about the following:

Who's your audience?

Unless you know otherwise, think of your audience as people who take an interest in your subject but have no detailed knowledge. Use your writing to guide readers through the subject and help them identify what is most important.

What are you going to say?

Think about what your readers want to know. You do not need to tell them everything. Use your opening paragraphs to:

- summarise succinctly what you're writing about

- tell readers what information they'll find
- put your research into context.

[Hemingway Editor](#) is a useful online tool to see if your writing is clear and concise. Simply paste your text into the tool. It will report on its complexity, give it a readability grade and make suggestions for improvements.

Do not paste sensitive information or unpublished data into Hemingway – it is a security risk. Use the [Flesch-Kincaid reading level tool in Microsoft](#) instead.

You could use Hemingway retrospectively to look at your last bulletin or article and see how you could improve your writing in the future.

Hemingway Editor will not allow you to paste into it if opened in some browsers. We advise using Google Chrome.

EXAMPLE

Do



Be concise

When writing:

- try to limit each paragraph to one or two short sentences
- be clear
- avoid complicated sentence structures
- stick to one idea or theme per paragraph
- break up large blocks of text with subheadings

Be consistent

Be consistent in the way you write in terms of:

- the style
- the tone
- the level of language
- the terminology used and its explanation.

Keep it short and simple (KISS)

KISS stands for 'keep it short and simple'. This is the principle that information is more easily understood if language is kept simple.

Don't use two words where one plain word will do, and always choose the shortest appropriate words or phrases:

- don't try to cram in too much information
- stick to one main idea or statement per sentence, with no more than one or two supporting clauses
- cut out unnecessary words; it makes the important facts more memorable
- don't start two consecutive sentences with 'The', if you can avoid doing so

Avoid phrases such as 'in the event of', 'by virtue of the fact that', 'the question as to whether' and 'if the possibility exists'. Instead, use 'if', 'because', 'whether' and 'if possible'.

Use the active voice

Always use the **active voice**, not the passive.

EXAMPLE

Do

The statistics show...

EXAMPLE

Don't

This is shown by the statistics

EXAMPLE

Don't

Be ambiguous

Sentences that can be read in several different ways may be misleading.

EXAMPLE

Vivian worked on the development stage of the project and is now part of the policy group with responsibility for legislation.

The sentence reads as though the policy group is responsible for legislation. In fact, it's Vivian.

It should read:

EXAMPLE

Vivian worked on the development stage of the project and is now part of the policy group, where she has responsibility for legislation.

Make sure that there's no ambiguity in your writing, and that your meaning is clear.

Use repetition

Avoid using words or phrases more than once in the same sentence (strictly speaking, you shouldn't repeat within paragraphs).

Similarly, don't repeat phrases such as 'the Short-term Output Indicators' throughout a document. You could refer to them as 'the Indicators', or use a standard abbreviation (but try to avoid using too many abbreviations and acronyms).

Also avoid using words that repeat something already implied in the same sentence (otherwise known as tautology).

EXAMPLE

I might possibly
The Quarterly Report is produced quarterly

Use mismatched words and phrases

This is where a list of items doesn't match the verb used in the sentence.

EXAMPLE

This book examines the plans, decisions and talks held during the conflict.

The verb "held" refers to "plans, decisions and talks", but you can't "hold" a plan or a decision. To solve this problem, split the sentence into two parts and add another verb.

EXAMPLE

This book examines the plans and decisions made, and the talks held...

Use confusing sentences

Don't use sentences where a phrase qualifies the wrong part of a sentence.

EXAMPLE

Surrounded by enemies on every shore, Hitler reasoned that the British would soon surrender.

The sentence implies that Hitler was surrounded by enemies, which is incorrect. This is called a “dangling participle”.

The sentence should read: “Hitler reasoned that the British, surrounded by enemies on every shore, would soon surrender.”

Use jargon

Always use [plain English](#) and be wary of any [words to watch](#) or [words not to use](#)