

Quick Guide: Write in Plain English

If you have been on any of our writing courses you will know that Zee Associates is an enthusiastic supporter of using plain English for all written documents. Sometimes people worry that in using plain English their writing may be too simple or not sound professional. However, plain English is not about 'the cat sat on the mat' style of writing; it doesn't mean reducing the length, or changing the meaning, of your message; and it's not about killing off long words. It's about writing your message in a clear and concise way that is also professional.

Advantages of writing in plain English:

- It is faster and easier to write
- It is faster and easier for your readers to read
- You get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way

So how do you write in plain English? Here are the top ten tips:

1. **Keep the reader in mind and use the right tone of voice.**
2. **Keep sentences short.** Aim for an average of 15 – 20 words, 10 for impact.
3. **Use the active voice** most of the time. It would be better to write, 'The secretary typed the letter' rather than 'The letter was typed by the secretary'.
4. **Use 'I', 'you' and 'we'** to make your writing more personal.
5. **You can use 'we' and 'I'** in the same letter or email.
6. **Use appropriate words for the reader.** Do they understand your acronyms or technical phrases?
7. **Don't be afraid to give instructions.** For example, 'Please complete the enclosed form and return it by 15 February'.
8. **Avoid nominalisations** by using verbs as verbs. So write, 'We need to decide the best option'. Not, 'A decision as to the best option needs to be made by us'.
9. **Use positive language.** Say what you can do, not what you can't. For example, 'I will let you have the figures on Monday morning' and not 'I won't be able to let you have the figures until Monday morning'.
10. **Use lists and bullet points** where appropriate. This gives you more 'white space' on the page, making it easier to read.

Check your writing to see if you are using plain English. If not, adopt the points above so you write less and leave work on time!

Compiled by Judith Di-Castri