

A: Write clearly

When you are writing material you need to know about your subject and the people you are writing for. You will develop your writing skills through practice. You also need to develop the ability to look at your work through someone else's eyes. Things that are clear to one person may not be clear to others. This is why it always helps to pre-test any material you produce. (See also How To IV(c) on editing, which contains further guidelines for clear writing.)

Although there is no set of 'rules' that will ensure that everything you write is clear, following the principles below will help.

1. Keep things simple and sentences short

Use short simple phrases whenever possible. For example, write, "is it possible?" rather than, "do you think it would be possible?" If you think you need to use longer phrases and sentences, ask yourself if you are really sure about what you want to say. Try to make your ideas clearer and you will be able to express them more simply.

As a general rule, sentences should be no longer than 20 words. In many situations it is better to write two short sentences than one long one. **For example:**

"Even families from low-income groups who do not have access to expensive sources of protein can, with careful planning, obtain a nutritious diet which will obviate against the need for purchasing supplementary vitamins"

can be rewritten as

"Families do not need a lot of money to eat well. It is better to plan nutritious meals than to buy unnecessary vitamin tablets."

2. Avoid jargon and unfamiliar or 'official' terms

Jargon is specialised language only understood by a particular group of people, such as the members of a particular profession. Medical jargon is common in the health field. It is best

to avoid words that you think are jargon, and instead *use everyday words* that most people are familiar with and understand. **For example:**

"We are learning more each day about the range of infections in people with HIV"

is clearer than

"The spectrum of infection with the human immunodeficiency virus continues to evolve with the availability of new scientific information".

If you need to use a word that you think is unfamiliar to people, make sure you explain what it means as simply as possible when you first use it. Using examples can help people understand new terms.

Spell out **acronyms** when you use them the first time in a publications, with the shortened version following in brackets. Do not assume that people will know what an acronym stands for, even if you consider it to be in common use. For example, write: "An official from the World Health Organization (WHO) gave us some advice." Then, further on in the same document, you can simply use "WHO".

3. Make sure the meaning of words is clear

For example, when using pronouns:

If you use a pronoun like 'she', 'he' or 'it' (that is, instead of a noun like 'Sally' or 'medicine'), make sure it is clear exactly whom or what is being referred to.

4. Do not assume gender

Unless the subject is obviously male or female, do not assume either. If it is not appropriate to use just 'he' or 'she', use 'she/he' or 'him/her'.

5. Using active and passive sentences

Active sentences can make stronger statements than passive sentences, by placing the emphasis at the beginning of the sentence. They are good for news stories in particular.

Sentences are passive when the subject does not perform the action, but rather has something done “to” them, or is the result of an action. Passive sentences make the point less powerful and more subtle, and can be useful particularly when you are dealing with a sensitive subject.

6. Keep the order logical and clear

When writing about something with a clear sequence (for example a life story, an incident or instructions), keep things in the correct order. Use numbers, letters or bullet points where appropriate.

For example, “Put antiseptic on and around the wound after shaving off any hair around the wound and washing the wound with soap and water.”

is clearer if written as three bullet or numbered points:

- (i) Shave off any hair around the wound
- (ii) Wash the wound with soap and water
- (iii) Put antiseptic on and around the wound

7. Concentrate on and highlight key points

Do not try to include everything you know, as too much information causes confusion and distracts readers from key points.

Keep in mind exactly what your reader needs to know that will get your message across effectively.

Putting text inside boxes, into another font or in **bold** or *italics* are useful ways of highlighting points.

8. Avoid unnecessary numbers and statistics

As a general guide, people can only absorb two or three statistics per page. Unless there is a requirement for precise figures, for example in a scientific paper, it is better to simplify statistics. For example, ‘48.7 per cent’ is clearer if expressed as ‘about half’; 495,000 is clearer if expressed as ‘approximately half a million’.

9. Concentrate on your opening paragraph

The first paragraph, often called ‘the hook’ by journalists, should:

- Grab the reader’s attention
- Introduce the main body of the text
- Be short and succinct
- Avoid the use of figures, brackets, or anything else that will break up the first sentence

10. Avoid using language that may offend people

Knowing about your target audience is essential. Some words are offensive to particular groups but not to others. If in doubt, leave the word out.

11. Match the tone to the subject matter

Use language appropriate to the subject you are talking about. If your subject is a serious disease that can cause death, a light-hearted, cheerful tone is not right. However, a light tone may be suitable if you are encouraging young people to play more sport, for example.

12. Check for accuracy

Check facts, figures, spellings and the accuracy of any information you include. If there are mistakes people will not be able to trust your work and/or it may be damaging to them.

Checklist

- Who exactly are you writing for?
- What are you trying to say?
- Are your phrases and sentences short and simple?
- Is the language used familiar to your user group?
- Are all unfamiliar words, terms and acronyms explained?