

Plain English

A sample from
"Business Proposal Writing Made Easy"



Scribe Consulting

Tim North, Scribe Consulting

www.scribe.com.au

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Tim North
Scribe Consulting
16A Montessori Place
Kingsley (Perth) WA 6026
Australia

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Plain English

4

*He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier;
and now is he turned orthography;
his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.*

William Shakespeare, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (Act 2, Scene 3), 1598

Rationale

- Much of today's writing is so complex or awkwardly phrased that it is difficult for its intended audience to understand.
- This can make it harder to persuade readers of the correctness and worth of your ideas.
- Clearer writing can lead to greater comprehension and an increased likelihood that your document brings about your desired goals.

Objectives

After completing this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Define plain English.
- Use short phrases instead of wordy ones.
- Use simple language in place of pompous, pretentious language.
- Limit your use of jargon to situations where it will be understood by the entire audience.
- Avoid buzzwords if at all possible.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use the active voice in preference to the passive voice.
- Set an appropriate tone in your writing.
- Avoid the use of Latin abbreviations such as *i.e.* and *e.g.*

4.1 What is plain English?

So what *is* plain English? These sources provide helpful definitions:

We define plain English as something that the intended audience can read, understand and act upon the first time they read it. Plain English takes into account design and layout as well as language.

www.plainenglish.co.uk/introduction.html

Let's get rid of some myths first. It's not baby-language, and it's not language that is abrupt, rude or ugly. Nor is it language that puts grammatical perfection ahead of clarity. It doesn't involve over-simplifying or 'dumbing down' the message so that it loses precision, force or effect.

It's any message, written with the reader in mind, that gets its meaning across clearly and concisely.

www.wordcentre.co.uk/page8.htm

Here are some examples of long-winded writing rewritten in plain English:⁷

Before

If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.

After

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ring.

Before

It is important that you shall read the notes, advice and information detailed opposite then complete the form overleaf (all sections) prior to its immediate return to the Council by way of the envelope provided.

After

Please read the notes opposite before you fill in the form. Then send it back to us as soon as possible in the envelope provided.

Before

High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process in children.

After

Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.

⁷ Adapted from examples provided with the kind permission of www.plainenglish.co.uk.

4.2 Readability statistics

Readability statistics measure how easily readers can understand a piece of text. Microsoft Word can compute two readability statistics for a document or selection. These are called the *Flesch reading ease* and the *Flesch–Kincaid grade level*.

These simple readability statistics consider only the average word length and average sentence length of the text. They are helpful (but not fool proof) measures of whether a piece of text can be considered plain English.

Consider the following text samples and the readability statistics that follow:

Before

Your enquiry about the use of the entrance area at the library for the purpose of displaying posters and leaflets about Welfare and Supplementary Benefit rights, gives rise to the question of the provenance and authoritativeness of the material to be displayed. Posters and leaflets issued by the Central Office of Information, the Department of Health and Social Security and other authoritative bodies are usually displayed in libraries, but items of a disputatious or polemic kind, whilst not necessarily excluded, are considered individually.

After

Thank you for your letter asking permission to put up posters in the entrance area of the library. Before we can give you an answer we will need to see a copy of the posters to make sure they won't offend anyone.

	Before text	After text
Flesch reading ease	2.6	70.7
Flesch–Kincaid grade level	23.1	8.6

The substantial jump in the Flesch reading ease score (2.6 to 70.7) indicates that the *after* text is much more easily readable. The similar drop in the grade level indicates that fewer years of formal education would be needed to understand the text.

As a guide, here are some typical reading ease score for well-known publications:⁸

- *READER'S DIGEST* magazine: 65
- an average 11-year-old's written assignment: 60–70
- *TIME* magazine: 52
- *HARVARD LAW REVIEW*: low 30s.

The techniques presented in this chapter will help you to achieve better readability statistics.

⁸ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flesch-Kincaid_readability_test

These statistics can be activated in current versions of Microsoft Word from the *Word Options* screen shown below. In earlier versions of Word, select *Tools* → *Options* → *Spelling and Grammar*. The statistics will appear on-screen after pressing F7 to run a spell check on the document.

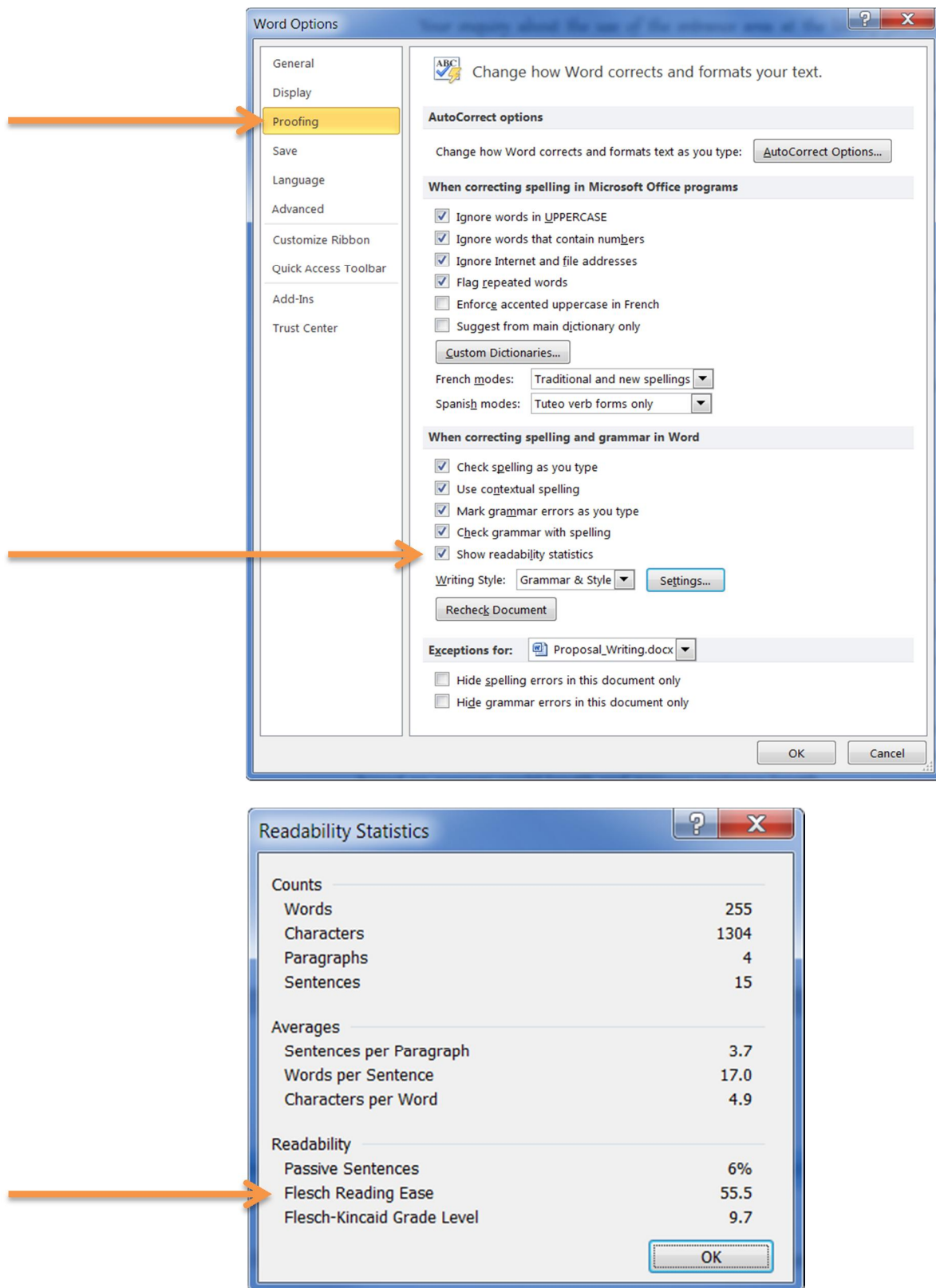


Figure 4.1: Microsoft Word's grammar checker can be configured to display useful readability statistics. (In earlier versions of Word, select *Tools* → *Options* → *Spelling and Grammar*.)

4.3 Key 1: Impress them with simplicity

Use one word, not several

In his 1972 work, *SAY WHAT YOU MEAN*, Rudolf Flesch, wrote: 'Avoid all prepositions and conjunctions that consist of more than one word. ... There's not a single one of these word combinations that can't be replaced by a simple word like *if, for, to, by, about* or *since*.'

Stripping away the somewhat ironic grammatical jargon that Flesch uses, we can generalise from his comments to say that we should often replace wordy phrases with simpler alternatives.

Table 4.1: Alternatives to some wordy phrases

Wordy phrase	Shorter phrase	Wordy phrase	Shorter phrase
a majority of	most	in the near future	soon
adequate number of	enough	in the neighbourhood of	near, close, about
along the lines of	like	in this day and age	now, currently
appears to be	appears	in view of the fact that	as, because, since
as a general rule	as a rule, usually	inasmuch as	as, because, since
as per your request	as requested	it has come to my attention that	I have learned that
at such time as	when	it is probable that	probably
at the present time	now	it is recommended that	we recommend
at this point in time	now	it would appear that	apparently
be in a position to	able to, can	it would be advisable to	should, ought
being of the opinion that	I believe	notwithstanding the fact that	although
by means of	by	on the part of	by
despite the fact that	although	owing to the fact that	because
due to the fact that	as, because, since	predicated upon the fact that	based on
during such time	while	pursuant to your request	as you requested
during the time that	then, when	subsequent to	after
for the reason that	as, because, since	take cognisance of the fact that	realise
four in number	four	that being the case	therefore
has the ability to	can	there can be little doubt that	probably
if conditions are such that	if	to the extent that	as much as
in a timely manner	promptly	to the fullest extent possible	fully
in accordance with your request	as requested	until such time as	until
in close proximity to	near, close, about	under the provisions of	under
in connection with	related to	we are in receipt of	we have received
in light of the fact that	because, since	with a view to	to
in many cases	often, usually	with reference to the fact that	about, concerning
in my own opinion	I believe	with regard to	about, concerning
in the event that	if		

 Exercises

1. Try to replace the boldface phrases in these sentences with the minimum number of words. (This may involve restructuring the sentence.)

a. A mechanism **for the purpose of** implementing ...

b. Reappraisal is not needed **for the reason that** the existing appraisal is ...

c. **In an effort to** increase quality ...

d. **And inasmuch as they're divided and inasmuch as** they lack resolution ...

2. Rewrite the following paragraphs to remove the wordiness. Also, make any other changes you think necessary to produce plain English.

a. At the present time we shall be pursuing the understated goals to the fullest extent possible.

b. Under the provisions of the contract, we are compelled to act so as to effect these changes in a timely manner.

c. Personal protective equipment should be worn if conditions are such that the WorkSafe exposure standards are likely to be exceeded.

d. The information in the report is to take into account, to the fullest extent possible, all corporate decisions that ...

e. That being the case, measures that have positive abatement costs need also to be considered.

Don't say it twice: tautologies

Avoid phrases that say the same thing twice. For example, there's no difference between *completely unanimous* and *unanimous*. If something is unanimous, saying that it was *completely* unanimous adds nothing. The extra word is unnecessary, and such phrases are called *tautologies*.

Here are some examples of phrases that say the same thing twice.

Table 4.2: Avoid phrases that say the same thing twice (tautologies).

Tautology	Simpler phrase
3.00 a.m. in the morning	3.00 a.m.
a major breakthrough	a breakthrough
absolutely wonderful	wonderful
advance planning	planning
circle around	circle
completely empty	empty
completely unanimous	unanimous
cooperate together	cooperate
definite decision	decision
each and every	each
enclosed within	enclosed
end result	result
exactly the same	the same
first priority	priority
new innovation	innovation
quite obvious	obvious
revert back	revert
usual custom	custom

Discussion

Can you add any tautologies to this list?

Avoid pompous, pretentious writing

There is a tendency for some authors to try to be pompous and pretentious — presumably in the belief that this makes them seem more intelligent. I once listened to a geologist who kept saying *thermally deagregate* instead of *melt*. This made him look insecure and foolish.

Franklin D. Roosevelt hated pompous language. He was said to be so annoyed by the following memo that he rewrote it and sent it back to the author. The memo described what federal workers were to do in case of an emergency:⁹

Such preparation shall be made as will completely obscure all federal and non-federal buildings occupied by the federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obscuration may be obtained either by blackout construction or by termination of the illumination.

Roosevelt's revision was:

Tell them that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something over the windows; and, in buildings where they can let the work stop for a while, turn out the lights.

The *rcmp-learning.org* web site describes pompous writing like so:¹⁰

When you write pompously, you judge wrongly that readers appreciate elegant writing; that they expect you as an educated person to sound elegant and impressive and will think you undignified if you don't.

This may have been true years ago, when 5 percent of the people had social position and educational status and the other 95 percent had neither. But that isn't the way things are any more and readers don't like you to write like they were.

In short, parading elegant words is no longer a suitable ceremony for the educated to use to IMPRESS the less educated.

Here's an example from a survey conducted by Microsoft:

A plurality (40%) of all respondents felt ...

"A plurality"? Come on! Who talks like this? Surely it would sound more natural like this:

Many respondents (40%) felt ...

Forty percent of all respondents felt ...

⁹ From *Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go*, U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d., pp. 38–9.

¹⁰ No author specified: www.rcmp-learning.org/iim/ecdi1132.htm#pomposity

 Exercises

1. Provide plain English alternatives to these wordy or pompous phrases:

a. It will provide the functionality that will enable us to reduce delays.

b. It would be safe to say that the client was opposed to the change.

c. ... is available contingent upon the contract being secured.

d. The new printer effected a reduction in toner usage.

2. Provide plain English alternatives for these words:

ascertain

conceptualise

encompass

hypothesise

inundate

operational

optimum

perpetuate

peruse

reciprocate

stipulate

3. Rewrite this sentence in plain English:

All modifications, additions, supplements, and/or changes to this contract are subject to and conditioned upon a fully executed, signed, and dated acceptance, approval, and confirmation at the Company's offices.

Eliminate buzzwords and unnecessary jargon

*Excuse me, but 'proactive' and 'paradigm'?
Aren't these just buzzwords that dumb people use to sound important?*

The Simpsons

Technical terms

JARGON is the specialised or technical language of a trade, profession or similar group.

A **BUZZWORD** is a word or phrase that usually sounds important or technical and is used primarily to impress laypersons.

I'm going to distinguish between jargon and buzzwords by likening them to alcohol and tobacco. Jargon, like alcohol, has a safe level of use. Buzzwords, like tobacco, do not. Let me explain.

There is a tendency in many organisations for some writers to use pretentious (but essentially meaningless) buzzwords and phrases. This is usually done to make it seem like the writer is knowledgeable or is using modern, sophisticated techniques. Such is the loathing that most people secretly feel for such language that it usually has the effect of making its users seem foolish. This sentiment is captured in the Simpsons quote above.

Consider these absurd buzzword-ridden statements:

A future-proof asset that seamlessly empowers your mission-critical enterprise communications.

A value-added, leverageable, global knowledge repository.

Repurposeable, leading-edge thoughtware that delivers results-driven value.

We excel at the dissemination of scalable, extensive, global initiatives and their socialisation throughout an entire enterprise.

This assumes an even greater importance when we repurpose global value to jump-start scoping and visioning.

A paradigm shift in underlying core performance.

You don't impress your readers with buzzwords. You impress them with clarity, brevity and persuasive arguments expressed in plain English.

If you must use clichéd phrases such as *best practice*, *paradigm*, *proactive* or *customer focussed*, be sure to follow them with a clear definition. For example:

For the purposes of this report, we define *best practice* as activities that meet the following criteria ...

In short: *If you can't define it clearly, don't use it.*

Table 4.3: Some buzzwords and phrases that are best avoided. (This material is used here with the kind permission of Deloitte Consulting.)

Buzz word	Plain English
24/7	Another server room term that consultants use to sound as if their entire circle of best friends actually works in the server room.
benchmark	An overused word, often misused to hype something. Especially bad when used as a verb.
best practice	A cliché, with a hint of arrogance and a dash of pompousness. Use it sparingly.
client focussed	Ever notice how saying 'I love you' one hundred times a day means less than sending an unexpected bunch of flowers once a week? It's the same thing with your clients. Saying 'client-focussed' endlessly doesn't make your client feel like the focus of anything.
core competencies	Normal people don't write like this.
empower	A grandiose term. There's a difference between providing capability and giving permission, but the bigger issue is that 'empower' is solidly enshrined in the Consulting Cliché Hall of Fame.
fast track	Sounds like advertising hype. If you want a verb, try <i>expedite</i> .
game plan	Put away the shoulder and knee pads and face it: you're not a professional athlete.
out of the loop	Many normal words can replace this used-to-be-hip expression. All of them are better.
proactive	A real word, but one we overuse to the point that it sounds trite.
synergy	The consulting version of 'buy one, get one free.' A legendary bit of consulting jargon. Say something in English.
think outside the box	If you're using this phrase, you are not acquainted with life outside the box.
touch base	Another term revealing an almost Freudian association between consultants and secret agents.
value-added	A good word to forget, unless you enjoy sounding like a used car salesman talking about floor mats.
win-win	Consulting cheerleader-speak.

Table 4.4: Some more buzzwords to avoid.

convergence	disintermediate	e-enable	empower
envisioneer	extensible	functionalities	impactful
incentivise	infomediaries	mindshare	mission-critical
monetise	paradigms	proactively	productise
recontextualise	reintermediate	repurpose	schemas
strategise	synergistic	synergise	ubiquitous

Unlike buzzwords, jargon can be used quite safely if you are *absolutely sure* that your audience will understand it.

For example, if I were writing material to be placed on the intranet of a group of accountants, I'd use the necessary technical language of that profession in order to ensure brevity and precision. No one in such a group would mind the use of such language — quite the reverse. If I were to 'dumb down' the material, it would be of lesser value and probably poorly received.

If I were placing the same information on a web site aimed at the general public, though, I'd employ different language. If pitched at the right level, they wouldn't consider it to be dumbed down or condescending; rather, they would find it clear and comprehensible.

Which content would be the more difficult one to prepare? Surely, the second one. It would involve a greater preparatory effort on my behalf as every element of technical language would have to be translated into a simpler form.

A recent British study¹¹ revealed:

- Three quarters (74%) of Britons believe that businesses deliberately use jargon to confuse and deceive their customers.
- More than half the people surveyed (56%) thought that people who don't know what they're talking about used jargon as a cover.
- Nearly a third (31%) admitted to using it themselves to impress their own customers and clients!

Discussion

- What is the attitude towards buzzwords in your organisation?
- Is it ever necessary to write in a buzzword-laden style?
- How can you know what jargon is safe to use for a given group of readers?

Exercises

1. Identify five or more additional buzzwords or phrases that are commonly used in your organisation. Create a plain English definition of each.
2. Show your work to the people around you. Do they understand what you've written? Can they suggest ways to clarify it further?

¹¹ NOP Research Group, Jargon Research. 1,000 adults over 15 years were questioned nationwide during November 2003.

Using fewer acronyms

A commonly followed practice is to spell out an acronym (a word formed from the initial letters of other words) in full the first time it's used then to use the acronym in all subsequent usage. For example:

The TPS (training practices survey) contains 40 questions. Please complete the TPS by Friday. It is important that you complete the TPS fully. If you have any questions about the TPS please contact HR. Thanks for participating in the TPS.

While common, this practice may not be sensible as each time you use an acronym, you set a memory test for your reader. Consider the following anecdote:

The abbreviations¹² to avoid are the ones you think it is necessary to explain in brackets the first time you use them. Each time you do this you set a memory test for your reader.

We have tested this by asking ten managers to read a two-page memo with two abbreviations explained on the first page. When they turned the page and read the abbreviations, we asked them what they stood for. Only one person correctly stated what one stood for — a 95% failure rate.

tinyurl.com/2faumlw

While only anecdotal, this comment suggests (probably rightly) that readers frequently don't remember what acronyms stand for.

What then should we do? Should we always spell acronyms out in full? Clearly that seems a bit excessive. What we need is a middle-of-the-road approach. For example, with a bit of creative rewriting, I can avoid the repeated use of the acronym TPS in the previous example:

The training practices survey contains 40 questions. Please complete **the survey** by Friday. It is important that you complete **the survey** fully. If you have any questions about **the survey** please contact HR. Thanks for participating in **the training practices survey**.

Here I have initially used the full phrase *training practices survey*. The next few times I've used just the final word of this phrase (*survey*) as a shorter alternative. Alternating between the full phrase and a one-word shorter form has allowed me to avoid using the acronym TPS. In this way, I can remove most acronyms from most documents.

I've retained the acronym HR in this example to illustrate that we don't have to be fanatical about removing *all* acronyms. A reasonable goal, though, might be to remove two-thirds of the acronyms from typical documents.

¹² This quote uses the term *abbreviations* several times. I'm assuming they meant *acronyms*.

Here are some further examples:

Full phrase	Acronym	Shortened form
Aboriginal and community health policies	A&CHPs	the policies
Australian Aluminium Council	AAC	the Council
consumer price index	CPI	the index
environmental protection plan	EPP	the plan
Health Promotion Unit	HPU	the Unit

Acronyms are sometimes appropriate though:

- Use an acronym if *everyone* knows it; for example, NSW, USA, BMW, ABC.
- When writing for an internal audience, use your commonly understood acronyms without explanation. Use the full form when writing for the public, though.

 **Exercise**

Come up with shortened forms for some of the common acronyms that you use in your department:

Full phrase	Acronym to avoid	Shortened form

4.4 Key 2: Impress them with brevity

Use short sentences

The full stop is your friend. Use it often. A good technique is to pretend that you get paid \$1 for every full stop you use. The shorter sentences produced by using plenty of full stops will make your writing plainer and your meaning more easily understood. They'll also simplify the job of punctuating what you write as shorter sentences need less punctuation.

Typically, sentences are no longer than 15 to 20 words. Occasionally, though, you can use a longer sentence for variety. Most long sentences, though, should be split into two or more shorter sentences. For example:

Now we get to the important part where you'll notice that some of the adjectives are a single word (for example, long), while others are made up of two words (for example, action packed), and the two-word adjectives were all hyphenated.

That sentence was thirty-nine words long and rather unwieldy. If we rewrite it as three smaller sentences, you'll find that it's easier to read and understand:

Now we get to the important part. / Notice that some of the adjectives are a single word (for example, long), while others are made up of two words; for example, action packed. / The two-word adjectives were all hyphenated.

The middle sentence is twenty-three words long and could be further split into two smaller sentences if you wished. You may be more likely to do this if writing for an audience for whom English was challenging. This includes people with literacy problems and those who speak English as a second language.

Exercises

Rewrite these long sentences as several smaller sentences. Feel free to make any other plain-English alterations as needed. Just be sure to preserve the meaning.

1. Physical inventory records can be accurately kept for exchange transactions by reduction of the inventory from the receiving report and requiring customer services to prepare a production report on repaired items going back into the inventory as a replacement for items that have been sent to the customer in exchange. [51 words]
2. A highlight of the web site is the development of two types of electronic advisory systems — Expert and Technical where both of the systems inform the user about standards by either asking a series of questions which determine whether, how, and which specific parts of the standard apply to the user's activities, or addressing complex standards by placing in one location a large amount of information about the standard. [70 words]

Use short paragraphs

Skim through these pages and look at the average length of the paragraphs. Now flip through the pages of a newspaper. What do you notice about both? The answer is that the paragraphs tend to be quite short.

The reason for this is that short paragraphs are easier to read. Let me prove my point. Let's say you have two ten-page reports sitting on your desk. They're identical except that one consists of a single paragraph lasting ten pages, while the other has normal-length paragraphs. Which one would you prefer to read?

How, then, do you decide *when* to start a new paragraph? Well, a general rule of thumb is that you start a new paragraph for each new idea or concept. Put another way, all the sentences in a paragraph should be related to the same idea or topic. When you write a sentence on a different idea, it's time for a new paragraph.

Let's put this into practice by dividing the following text up into separate paragraphs. For clarity, I've numbered the sentences.

[1] When you browse the web, some sites will employ a behind-the-scenes feature that suggests a font for your web browser to use when displaying the site. [2] For example, my business's web sites (www.scribe.com.au and www.betterwritingskills.com) tell your browser to use Verdana when displaying the site. [3] Of course, if the computer you're using doesn't have the Verdana font installed then it won't be able to use it, and it will fall back to another font. [4] Many web sites, though, don't make any recommendation about what font the browser should use to display them. [5] With these web sites, the browser will simply use its default font — and guess what? [6] That's usually Times New Roman. [7] That's right, the font that most people view the web with is short, skinny and has a small x-height. ☹ [8] Take heart, though. [9] You can easily tell your web browser to use your favourite font as its default font. [10] In Internet Explorer, select *Internet Options* from the *Tools* menu then click on the *Fonts* button. [11] In Netscape, select *Preferences* from the *Edit* menu then click on *Appearance* then *Fonts*.

Let's just take a moment to note how daunting this long paragraph looks. Breaking it into shorter paragraphs will certainly improve the friendliness of our document.

But where should we break it?

Sentence 1 talks about how a web site can suggest a font for a browser to use. This is the topic for this paragraph and should be expanded upon by subsequent sentences. Sentence 2 continues this same idea by providing an example. Sentence 3 continues the same idea with a proviso. These three sentences work nicely together as a single paragraph.

The fourth sentence, though, starts to talk about a subtly different topic — web sites that *don't* suggest a specific font. This change of topic (and the fact that the previous paragraph was

already a good length) suggest that it's time for a new paragraph. Sentences 5, 6 and 7 continue the topic of web sites that don't suggest a font to the browser.

Sentence 8 starts a new topic: remedying the situation. This calls for a new paragraph. Sentences 9, 10 and 11 continue that topic and thus the paragraph. So, reformatted, we have:

[1] When you browse the web, some sites will employ a behind-the-scenes feature that suggests a font for your web browser to use when displaying the site. [2] For example, my business's web sites (www.scribe.com.au and www.betterwritingskills.com) tell your browser to use Verdana when displaying the site. [3] Of course, if the computer you're using doesn't have the Verdana font installed then it won't be able to use it, and it will fall back to another font.

[4] Many web sites, though, don't make any recommendation about what font the browser should use to display them. [5] With these web sites, the browser will simply use its default font — and guess what? [6] That's usually Times New Roman. [7] That's right, the font that most people view the web with is short, skinny and has a small x-height. ☹

[8] Take heart, though. [9] You can easily tell your web browser to use your favourite font as its default font. [10] In Internet Explorer, select *Internet Options* from the *Tools* menu then click on the *Fonts* button. [11] In Netscape, select *Preferences* from the *Edit* menu then click on *Appearance* then *Fonts*.

Use the active voice

Open almost any book on grammar or writing skills, and you'll come across the advice 'Use the active voice in preference to the passive voice'. But what does this mean?

Well, sentences written in the active voice have the following structure:

do-er action receiver

For example:

John wrote the report.

We misplaced your correspondence.

The council reserved its decision.

The ratepayer thanked him.

As you can see, sentences written in the active voice all start with the *do-er* of the action. Sentences written in the passive voice, though, start with the *receiver* of the action:

receiver action by-whom

For example:

The report was written by John.

Your correspondence was misplaced by us.

The decision was reserved by the Council.

He was thanked by the ratepayer.

Okay, so we've made a distinction between the two. This brings us back to the traditional advice that it is preferable to write in the active voice rather than the passive voice. The reason for this is twofold:

- The active voice sounds simpler.
- The active voice requires fewer words.

For example:

The dog bit him.	<i>Active</i>
He was bitten by the dog.	<i>Passive</i>
We will send your goods within 14 days.	<i>Active</i>
Your goods will be sent by us within 14 days.	<i>Passive</i>

The world is not going to end if you write a few sentences in the passive voice now and then. Nonetheless, using the active voice in the majority of cases will improve your writing by making it simpler and shorter.

The passive voice does have one 'advantage' though: it allows us to hide responsibility for an action by omitting the do-er. Consider this alternative structure for passive sentences:

receiver action

The report was written.

Your correspondence was misplaced.

The decision was reserved.

He was thanked.

When we write in this fashion, it allows a certain amount of evasion. This can be helpful if you are the bearer of bad news.

Exercises

Rewrite these sentences in the active voice.

1. His email may have been deleted by someone else.

.....

2. Your report was lost by the supervisor.

.....

3. Labour costs for this project were underestimated by us.

.....

4.5 Key 3: Impress them with your style

Choose a suitable tone of voice: first-person pronouns and contractions

Consider these questions as they relate to your organisation:

- When is it appropriate to use *first-person pronouns* like *I, we* and *us*?
- When is it appropriate to use contractions like *it's, isn't, we'll* and *let's*?

If we were emailing a personal note to a friend, most of us would use both first-person pronouns and contractions. If we were writing a report for our senior executives, we may use neither. So the question arises: *How do we decide when to use them and when not to?*

First-person pronouns and contractions can affect the *tone* of our writing as shown in the following table:

Table 4.5: The possible effects of contractions and personal pronouns on tone

Contractions and pronouns	No contractions or first-person pronouns
informal	formal
disrespectful	respectful
natural sounding	stiff, wooden, pompous
inviting, warm	distant, cold, official

A common practice in business writing is to always avoid first-person pronouns and contractions because it's believed that they're too informal or too disrespectful. For example, many report writers will always write *the Department* instead of *I*, or *it is* instead of *it's*.

While there are, in some situations, good legal reasons for writing *the Department* instead of *I*, do you do it too often? Similarly, is it *always* necessary to avoid contractions when writing?

My own feeling is that always avoiding first-person pronouns and contractions can result in unnecessarily formal writing that may sound unnatural or wooden. People don't usually speak this way. They speak using both first-person pronouns and contractions, so I offer the advice that in many (but not all) situations it's appropriate to *write it the way you'd say it*. (You'll have noticed that I've done that throughout this document. I did so to create a natural, friendly tone.)

Business writing is often highly stylised and rather pompous. For example: 'Pursuant to our recent communication the department writes to inform you that...' or 'The party of the first part...'. This can leave your readers feeling alienated or annoyed. This is particularly true if you're writing for the general public, so try reading your report out loud. If you find yourself saying things that are different from what you've written (for example, *let's* instead of *let us*), that's a clue that your writing may be a bit too formal.

Of course, there can be good reasons to avoid first-person pronouns and contractions. For example:

- You're trying to be highly formal; for example, you're reprimanding someone.
- You're writing a legal document or technical specification.
- You're writing to someone more senior and wish to show respect and deference.
- Your manager just insists on it.

On balance, though, in most writing, I think that personal pronouns and contractions are quite acceptable. If you write in a natural-sounding fashion, you'll be more easily understood, more personal and will seem less contrived.

Here are some examples of government web sites using first-person pronouns and/or contractions to set a personal and warm tone when dealing with the general public:

*If **you** are emailing **us**, please include **your** name and phone number in case **we** need to ask **you** more details about your question. This is not essential if **you** prefer not to identify **yourself**.*

www.asic.gov.au/asic/ASIC.NSF/byheadline/Contacting+us?openDocument

*If **you're** dissatisfied with a particular decision, service or action by **us**, **you** have the right to make a complaint. **We** recommend that **you**:*

www.ato.gov.au/corporate/content.asp?doc=/content/33746.htm

*This means if **you** win a prize, and provided it has not already been claimed, **we'll** automatically send **you** a cheque for the winning amount five weeks after the draw. **You don't** have to check **your** numbers or even bring **your** ticket in.*

www.lotterywest.wa.gov.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=120

***Don't** panic — lots of people get into this situation.*

www.dotu.wa.gov.au/backpocket/wrong.html

Exercises

Rewrite the following text to make it seem more natural and less antagonistic by using first-person pronouns and contractions. Hint: Using the word *shall* is almost always contrary to plain English.

1. The Department shall respond to your request within 30 days after receiving your application. This response shall include written notification of the Department's decision.
2. The Department requires the applicant to complete a statutory declaration to this effect.
3. Before making an application for an order for a road closure the applicant shall obtain and record the consent of not less than two-thirds of the occupiers of land immediately adjacent to the road it is proposed to close.

4. Subject to availability, the applicant shall, at no charge to the Department or its service providers, offer meeting facilities and associated ancillary support as may be required to conduct the workshops.
5. Each member shall have the right to sell, give or bequeath all or any part of his membership interest to any other member without restriction of any kind.

Latin is dead: avoid phrases like *ergo*, *i.e.* and *e.g.*

As we've seen in this chapter, converting difficult, jargon-strewn writing into plain English can require a good deal of effort. We can aid ourselves and our readers by avoiding the unnecessary use of Latin phrases in our writing. The abbreviations *i.e.* and *e.g.* may be the two most common of these.

i.e. is Latin for *id est* and means *that is*. Here are some sample sentences:

The standard discount applies; *i.e.* 10%.

Our network drives (*i.e.* drives F through Z) are backed up each night.

Our writing would be clearer if we replaced these examples with:

The standard discount applies; that is, 10%.

Our network drives (that is, drives F through Z) are backed up each night.

e.g. is Latin for *exempli gratia* and means *for example*. Here are some sample sentences:

Try using easy-to-read fonts; *e.g.* Georgia and Verdana.

Some staff (*e.g.* John and Tony) are on leave.

Again, our writing would be clearer if we replaced these examples with:

Try using easy-to-read fonts; for example, Georgia and Verdana.

Some staff (for example, John and Tony) are on leave.

If you do chose to use *i.e.* and *e.g.*, notice that they have distinct meanings and are not interchangeable.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented a number of strategies for making your writing simpler. Let's briefly review them:

- Use one word, not several.
- Avoid pompous, pretentious writing.
- Eliminate buzzwords and unnecessary jargon.
- Use fewer acronyms.
- Use short sentences.
- Use short paragraphs.
- Use the active voice.
- Choose a suitable tone of voice.
- Latin is dead: avoid phrases like *ergo*, *i.e.* and *e.g.*

Exercises

Use all of the techniques that we've learned in this chapter to rewrite the following examples in plain English.

1. Should you be involved in an accident while the vehicle is in your possession, it is necessary that you to indicate the damage on the appropriate place on the claims form.
2. The Agency cannot meet this additional work primarily because it comes at a time when a 15 percent reduction is faced in budget resources, and no growth is being considered.
3. When the electricity supply is cut off, it causes a power surge to be put in the circuit and this can lead to a loss of data being suffered in the financial data that has been collected by the company.
4. Operationally, teaching effectiveness is measured by assessing the levels of agreement between the perceptions of instructors and students on the rated ability of specific instructional behaviour attributes which were employed during course instruction. Due to the fact that instructors come from diverse backgrounds and occupy different positions within a given university, both individual and organizational based factors may contribute to the variance in levels of agreement between perceptions.
5. In the event that any employee is requested to testify in any judicial or administrative proceeding, said party will give the department prompt notice of such request in order that the department may seek an appropriate protective order.

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