Plain English tip sheet

## We and you

## Plain English Campaign

More about plain English, including free guides   
and words to avoid:   
  
[plainenglish](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/).co.uk

* **We**, not your department or organisation
* **You**, not the user, students, staff, the applicant

## Use active verbs

**We’re doing this**, not This is being done by us…

## Keep it short and structured

* Best average sentence length is 15-20 words
* Keep paragraphs short and single-issue
* Cut out padding (and unnecessary politeness)
* Use lists

## Front-load with what matters most to your audience

Put the key message first in the:

* first words in email subject lines, headers, sentences
* first paragraph of documents and web pages
* first sentence in a paragraph

## Use the simplest words that work

* **Need**,not require or requirement
* **Tell**,not inform
* **Use**,not utilise
* **Help**,not assist or assistance
* **Extra or more**,not additional

## Avoid nominalisations (zombie nouns)

* Fail, not fail**ure**
* Available, not availabil**ity**
* Engage, not engage**ment**
* Investigate, not investigat**ion**
* Refuse, not refus**al**

Create accessible content

## 1. Use the Plain English tip sheet overleaf

Photocopy it and stick it up near your desk as a reminder!

## 2. Your audience: what do they need and want to know?

* As a… [who is the user?]
* I need to… [what does the user want to do?]
* So that… [why does the user want to do this?]

[gov.uk/guidance/content-design/user-needs](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/user-needs)

## 3. Self-edit with the Hemingway app

‘If it’s possible to cut a word out, always cut it out,’ says George Orwell in the essay [Politics and the English language](http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/).

Paste draft text into the [hemingwayapp.com](http://www.hemingwayapp.com/), which:

* highlights complicated sentences, passive voice and adverbs
* offers suggestions
* gives a readability score
* lets you edit on-screen, to reduce the highlights and improve your score.

## 4. Pair-writing

Get someone to help you craft key communications and documents.

Critical questions they could ask:

* **who’s your target audience?**
* **is this really the best angle from the audience point of view?**
* **are the key points the audience cares about at the top?**

## **5. Perfect the art of making images accessible**

Article for writing great alternative text, by WebAIM:   
[webaim.org/techniques/alttext](https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/)

Interactive tutorial to help you write effective alt text:   
[poet.diagramcenter.org](https://poet.diagramcenter.org/" \o "Guide to creating accessible images: writing effective Alt Text)

Quick quiz: how well can you write alt text? [ccconlineed.instructure.com/courses/970/quizzes/10685/](https://ccconlineed.instructure.com/courses/970/quizzes/10685/)