PLAIN ENGLISH STYLE GUIDE

The following guidance is based on best practices for writing online or for diverse audiences. Many of these formatting guidelines are based on the Plain English campaign.

As the campaign states, advantages of plain English include:

- It is faster to write.
- It is faster to read.
- You get your messages across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

Further information can be found on [Plain English Campaign](#) and [Writing for GOV.UK.](#)

Writing for online

Good online content is easy to read and understand.

It uses:

- Short sentences.
- Sub-headed sections.
- Simple vocabulary.

This helps people find what they need quickly and absorb it effortlessly.

Keep sentences short

Most experts would agree that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words. It is good to mix it up. A combination of short and long sentences will read much better. If you can say it in fewer words, then do so!

Active verbs

Active writing reads in a modern, crisp and professional way. What is the difference between active and passive verbs? Let's quickly look at sentence structure to answer this. There are three main parts to almost every sentence:

- A subject (the person, group or thing doing the action).
- A verb (the action itself).
- An object (the person, group or thing that the action is done to).

An example of an active sentence might be: 'Peter watched the television.'

A passive version would be: 'The television was watched by Peter.'

Peter (**subject**) watched (**verb**) the television (**object**).

Watched is an active verb here. The sentence says who is doing the watching before it says what is being watched.

Nominalisation

A nominalisation is a type of abstract noun formed from a verb. Often these noun types are used instead of the verbs they come from. Because they are merely the names of things, they sound as if nothing is actually happening in the sentence. Like passive verbs, too many of them make writing very dull and heavy-going.

Verb	Nominalisation
complete	completion
introduce	introduction
fail	failure
investigate	investigation

Here are some examples of nominalisations and how you might fix them:
We had a discussion about the matter.

- **We discussed the matter.**

There will be a stoppage of trains by drivers.

- **Drivers will stop the trains.**

The implementation of the method has been done by a team.

- **A team has implemented the method.**

Use 'you' and 'we'

Try to call the reader 'you', even if the reader is only one of many people you are talking about generally. If this feels wrong at first, remember that you wouldn't use words like 'the applicant' and 'the supplier' if you were speaking to somebody sitting across a desk from you. This approach is useful for online writing or marketing & communications.

Here are some examples of this:

Applicants must send us...

- **You must send us...**

We always tell customers before we...

- **We will tell you before we...**

Advice is available from...

- **You can get advice from…**

Similarly, always call your organisation 'we'. And there is nothing wrong with using 'we' and 'I' in the same letter or communication deliverable.

Numbered lists

A numbered list should be introduced by a main clause, followed by a colon. If part of full sentence, then the first word of each item should be lower case, and each item should have appropriate ending punctuation.

Educational Design and Engagement is involved in the following areas across the University:

1. Learning design.
2. Policy making.
3. Virtual learning environments (VLEs).
4. Distance Learning at Scale (DLAS).
5. Open Educational Resources (OERs).

Capital letters

As a best practice, the following word types should be capitalised:

- Proper nouns (people's names, towns and cities, countries, organisations).
- Nationalities, languages and religions.
- Days of the week and months of the year.
- Job titles, course titles, names of institutions (University of Edinburgh, Director of Learning, Teaching & Web Service).

Word choice and formatting

Here are some rules for common word choices or types found in legal or policy documents.

e.g.

Try rephrasing to avoid, and instead use 'for example'.

i.e.

Try rephrasing to avoid, and instead use 'that is'.

Money

£5, 75p, €10 not £5.00 or £0.75

Unless in a table, write out in full the name of foreign currencies: francs, yen (no initial capitals).

Numbers

- One to nine: write out in full.
- 10 and above: use digits.
- Above 999, use a comma: 1,000, 3,500, 23,000.

If a number is at the start of a sentence, always spell it out in full, or rewrite the sentence, if possible, to avoid the problem. For neatness/consistency, spell out numbers if, in a range of two or more related numbers, at least one is higher than 10:

'The group is made up of between seven and thirteen service users.'

Additional resources

University of Edinburgh style guide – effective digital content
The style guide from the University of Edinburgh highlights the following tips:

- 'Professor' should be written in full rather than abbreviating to 'Prof'.
- Some Latin plurals should be treated as English ones – like saying 'forums' instead of 'fora'. Although fora might be considered more technically correct, it's also off-putting.
- Words ending in 'ise' should use the British English spelling, not the American English spelling 'ize'.

Referring to the University
The guide also discusses the correct way to refer to the University. The context of 'The University of Edinburgh' has already been set, so you shouldn't need to repeat it. Simply refer to 'the University', using an initial capital. Other universities being discussed in a generic sense should use a lower case 'u'.

Use the right version
There are two University style guides – one for print and one for web. They are very similar, but there are some small areas where the advice is different (for example, in the formatting of bullets).

The University of Edinburgh Web Style Guide also includes a section on how to handle abbreviations in web content.