HEALTHY SANDWELL

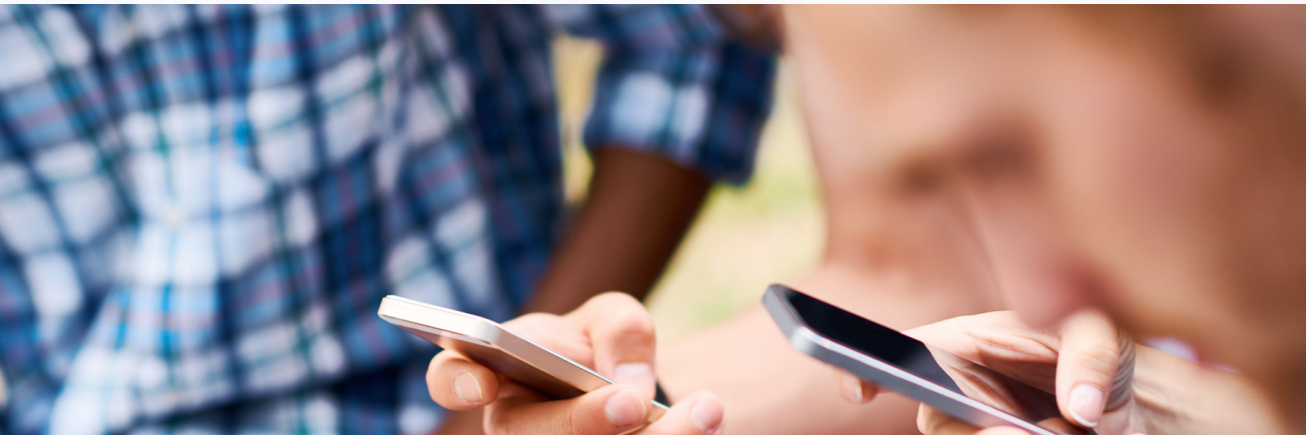We find the support you need

Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council

PUBLIC HEALTH SANDWELL PLAIN ENGLISH GUIDE

NOV 2023

This document is designed to be used in collaboration with the Public Health Sandwell Communication Guide

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INTRODUCTION

A Brief analysis of Sandwell residents

In 2021, almost 30% of Sandwell residents aged 16 and over (28.9%, 76,840) reported having no qualifications. This is much higher than the England and Wales figure of 18.2%.

Data released by the Learning and Work Institute in June 2022 shows Sandwell has the lowest literacy levels compared to other Local Authorities in the West Midlands area.

01 88% of Sandwell residents speak English as their main language compared to 92.3% nationally.

02 Of those residents who do not have English as their main language, 24.8% cannot speak English well and 5.5% cannot speak English at all.

03 In 5 wards of Sandwell less than 80% of residents speak English as their main language.

04 The top four languages spoken in Sandwell after English are Punjabi, Polish, Bengali and Urdu.

05 Sandwell has the lowest literacy levels compared to other Local Authorities in the West Midlands with 25.7% requiring essential skills support.

AIMS

- To reach a further 10% of the population by translating key information into the top 4 languages spoken in Sandwell, after English.
- To make all Public Health communications easier to understand for all and inclusive of community needs.
- To understand the importance of Health Literacy and how we can embed Health Literacy policies across our work, particularly in verbal communications.
- To ensure the services offered by Public Health are inclusive.

PLAIN ENGLISH - INTRODUCTION

What is Plain English?

Plain English is a style of giving information that enables someone to get the facts they need, understand them easily and act on them if they need to. It involves not only writing more clearly, for example through simpler phrases, more direct language or shorter sentences, but also structuring and laying out information in a way that makes it easier to follow. The term usually applies to written information, but plain language in speech is just as important, particularly when there can be more constraints on checking understanding.

The simple rules:

There are a few simple rules for writing in plain English. In summary these are:

- avoid wherever possible using jargon, abbreviations and technical terms – if you have to use them provide a clear explanation
- avoid complicated English or uncommon words
- use active not passive phrases, for example say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'
- keep sentences short
- plan out the order and structure of the summary
- break up the text, for example use bullet lists or headings
- ask local residents and organisations to read a draft to find out if anything is unclear

Why Plain English?

Everyone scan reads: we all have little time and short attention spans. Plain English helps people understand if and why your communication matters to them.

It gets your message across: it makes it clear to people what action they need to take, leading to better outcomes for you and your audience.

It's more accessible: it's especially helpful for the 10% of the population with a visual impairment or reading disability such as dyslexia.

It saves your audience time: it may take you longer to write in plain English, but this pays dividends as it saves everyone else time and makes your communication more effective.

It's appropriate for leaders and academics: the more educated the person and the more specialist their knowledge, the greater their preference for plain English, because it allows them to understand the information as quickly as possible.

Plain English in a nutshell

1. Think about your audience
2. Open with what matters most to your audience
3. Use 'you' and 'we'
4. Avoid the passive voice
5. Keep sentences and paragraphs short
6. Use lists
7. Use the simplest words that work
8. Avoid nominalisations ("zombie nouns")

THE MAIN POINTS

Keep it short

Long sentences and paragraphs make information difficult for to take in or understand.

Keeping sentences short is a key part of writing clearly. A good sentence length is between 15 and 20 words but vary sentence length to make your writing more interesting.

Try to keep to one main idea or point per sentence. This is particularly important if you are writing for people who may not have a high level of literacy or whose first language is not English.

Break up sentences with a full stop. Avoid using semicolons. You can start a new sentence with a conjunction, such as "and" or "however".

Short paragraphs are easier on the eye than a block of dense text. So break them up where you can. Use bullet points to break up text but do not overuse them.

Write active not passive sentences

Active sentences (where somebody does something) are direct, lively and interesting. Passive sentences (where something is done to someone) can sound bureaucratic and dull.

This is the order of an active sentence:
1. noun - the 'doer', the person or the thing that is acting
2. verb - the action itself
3. object - the thing that the action is being done to

The structure of a passive sentence is:
1. object
2. verb
3. noun

Examples

Active: We wrote this guide.

Passive: This guide was written by us.

Active: The council has to follow certain rules set by the Government in relation to third party contributions.

Passive: Certain rules set by the Government have to be followed by the council in relation to third party contributions.

Occasionally it can be better to use a passive sentence. For example if an active sentence sounds aggressive, or if you need to share responsibility when something has gone wrong. However this should be the exception rather than the rule.

Jargon

To us, using jargon may be a sign of our professional expertise. To someone else it may be impossible to understand, off-putting and appear pompous.

Jargon can also be misunderstood.

Examples

"When used correctly, exempted appliances should not emit visible smoke, but even Defra exempt appliances can emit high levels of PM2.5 pollution."

Think of the confusion this may cause for someone not familiar with the subject matter.

You are not communicating if people do not understand you. Be clear about who you are writing for and choose your words accordingly.

Clichés and buzzwords

Cliché: a word or expression that has lost most of its force through overexposure.

Examples

"All that glitters is not gold."

Words or phrases become clichés when they are used often. A good test is if you have heard a word or expression so many times it makes you wince or switch off completely.

Examples

Stakeholders: do we really know who these people are?

Going forward: everyone seems to be going forward.

Because clichés are overused, the reader (or listener) can easily ignore what you are trying to say. Avoid using them.

Long words

Choose words that are appropriate to your audience. If you have a choice between a long word and a short word that mean the same thing, use the short one.

Examples

Use and utilise
Form and proforma

If you are writing for people with learning disabilities always use words that are easy to understand.

Do not be afraid to use the same word twice in one sentence. It can be less confusing.

Slang

Do not use slang or text-speak unless you are doing a time-limited, specific project working closely with and for young people or children.

Not everyone will understand slang or text-speak. It can mean different things to different people. Meanings can change quickly.

Examples

Wicked, sick, dope

Use the right tone

Using the right tone will help give people a positive image of the council. Using the wrong tone can create the wrong impression and harm the council's reputation.

Your tone should be friendly and caring, without sounding patronising.

Use everyday words and language, rather than formal jargon. Write to inform, not to impress.

Avoid any language that might offend people.

It can help to read what you have written out loud. Put yourself in the position of the person you are communicating with. What impression will your words give?

Use 'I', 'we' and 'you'. It makes your tone more personal, sincere and less intimidating. Use 'we' instead of 'the council' or 'Public Health' when it is clear you are writing as a representative of that organisation.

Consider readability

Readability testing is a way of getting an idea of how easy a text is to read. It is not an exact science and should not be used on its own measure of the suitability of your text.

If you are writing your text using Microsoft Word, you can get a readability score by following these instructions:

- Select "File", and then select "Options".
- Select "Proofing".
- Make sure "Show readability statistics" is selected.

This will give you a Flesch-Kincaid score. If the score is high, the sentence is more readable. Ideally you should be aiming for a score of 70 or higher.

If you are producing a document that it is important it is recommended that it is tested on a selection of potential readers before it is printed.

Tips for reducing the reading age of a document include:

Flesch Reading Ease	
Score	Style
90 - 100	Very easy
80 - 90	Easy
70 - 80	Fairly easy
60 - 70	Standard
50 - 60	Fairly difficult
30 - 50	Difficult
0 - 30	Very difficult

- Use simple words - opt for plain language and choose common words over complex ones.
- Shorten sentences - Break complex ideas into shorter sentences to improve comprehension.
- Avoid jargon - minimise technical or industry-specific terminology that might be unfamiliar to a broad audience.
- Active voice - use active voice instead of passive voice for straightforward and direct communication.
- Limit subordinate clauses - reduce the use of complex sentence structures with multiple clauses.
- Visual elements - include visuals like charts, graphs or illustrations to aid understanding.
- Bullet points - use bullet points to present information in a concise and organised manner.

Readability continued

- Whitespace - ensure proper spacing between lines and paragraphs for a clean and less overwhelming layout.
- Logical flow - organise content in a logical sequence to help readers follow the information easily.

You should also consider **accessibility** (see Public Health Sandwell Communication Guide)

AN A-Z OF PLAIN ENGLISH

Abbreviations and acronyms

An abbreviation is the shortened form of a word or phrase.

An acronym is an abbreviation that is made up of the first letters of other words, so that the abbreviation itself forms a word.

Examples

Abbreviations: Oct, PCT, BBC, LGA, SMBC, CD, NHS, Mr, Dr
Acronyms: SPIN, AIDS, IDeA, SCIE

Write out the words in full on first use, with the abbreviation in brackets afterwards.

Examples

The Local Government Association (LGA) recommends that councils avoid the use of jargon. The LGA has published a list of words that councils should avoid.

Write all letters in capitals for abbreviations that are pronounced as a series of letters, for example RNIB, BBC.

Write all letters in capitals for acronyms unless the organisation that you are referring to writes it in a different way, for example Socitm, IDeA.

Do not use full stops between the letters of the abbreviation or at the end of it. Do not leave spaces between the letters.

Avoid the use of etc., e.g. and i.e. especially if you are writing for people whose first language is not English or who may have a learning disability. Use 'and so on', 'for example', 'in other words' or 'that is' instead. However, if you do have to use e.g. and i.e. use them with full stops separating the letters.

Addresses and phone numbers

The way that you should write an address will depend on how you want it set out on the page.

Examples

Sandwell Council House, Freeth Street, Oldbury, B69 3DE

Sandwell Council House
Freeth Street
Oldbury
B69 3DE
United Kingdom
Tel: 0121 569 5100
Email: press_office@sandwell.gov.uk
Web: www.healthysandwell.co.uk

If you are writing the word 'email' as part of a sentence it should be written with a lower case e, as should fax, textphone and telephone number.

Set out phone numbers as follows: 0121 569 5100, 01384 276812, 0800 011 4656

Ages

Do not use hyphens in ages unless to avoid confusion, although it's always best to write in a way that avoids ambiguity. For example, 'a class of 15 16-year-old students took the A level course' can be written as '15 students aged 16 took the A level course'. Use 'aged 4 to 16 years', not '4-16 years'.

Avoid using 'the over 50s' or 'under-18s'. Instead, make it clear who's included: 'aged 50 years and over' and 'aged 17 and under'.

American and UK English

Use UK English spelling and grammar. For example, use 'organise' not 'organize', 'modelling' not 'modeling', and 'fill in a form', not 'fill out a form'.

Ampersand (written as &)

Do not use ampersands except in abbreviations where everyone would use them such as A&E or where they appear in a company name or logo.

Do not put spaces before or after the ampersand.

Apostrophes

We mainly use an apostrophe to show:
- where a letter or letters are missing (called a contraction)
- when something or someone belongs to someone or something.

We also use it in some expressions to do with time.

Missing letters (contractions)

It's ok to use contractions in our public information. However, avoid using them in formal documents.

Examples

Don't (do not) forget to back up your files.

It's (it is) a lovely day for the Big Spring Clean.

You're (you are) always here before me in the morning. It's (it is) your choice if you want to leave your house at 6am. I'd (I would) rather stay in bed for an extra hour.

Only use an apostrophe with 'its' when it is short for 'it is'.

Examples

It's that easy!

The dog wagged its tail.

Apostrophes continued

To indicate ownership or possession

The apostrophe follows the person or thing that owns the thing or action we are writing about.

Examples

The woman's scarf was blue.

The protestors' van was blocking the road.

Most customers' complaints are dealt with promptly.

With plurals and possession it's a good idea to think about how you would say the word, for example

Expressions of time

Examples

Do not use an apsotrophe for:
One week pregnant
One month late
Three days old

You should use an apostrophe for:
One week's pay (one week of pay)
Two month's notice (two months of notice)

If in doubt, see if you can replace the apostrophe with of.

Bold, italics and underlining

Avoid the use of *italics* and <u>underlining</u>. They make the text difficult to read.

Use **bold** for emphasis, but do not overuse it or it will lose its impact.

Make the type size bigger (larger font sizes) instead of underlining to show the difference between the text and the heading.

Bullet points

A list in which each point is a complete sentence should be written as a sentence with a capital letter at the beginning.

Examples

According to the feedback, this event was better than the last one.
- There was plenty of food and everyone liked it.
- No one complained about the heating this time.
- The speakers were praised for their entertaining and informative presentations.

A list which is a continuous sentence is written with lower case letters at the beginning and can have semi colons if it is in a long or more 'official' document. Note that there are no capital letters at the start of each bullet point.

Examples

Challenges that we face next time include:
- ease of booking;
- latecomers; and
- stationery supplies.

When a list is to appear on the web, in a leaflet or a booklet, bullet points that are a continuous sentence are written without semicolons.

Examples

Challenges that we face next time include:
- ease of booking
- latecomers
- stationery supplies.

Capital letters

Do not use blocks of capital letters as they are hard to read. On the web and in email they are the same as shouting.

Keep capitals to a minimum. Using capital letters can make a word seem more important than it is and can create a barrier between you and your reader. In general, capital letters should be used for proper nouns only. Proper nouns are words, or groups of words that refer to people, places and things that are unique.

Examples
England, The Oxford Dictionary of English, Sandwell Council House, Public Health directorate

Use a capital letter for council only when it is used as part of a name: Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.

Here are some areas where capitals are used that often cause debate or uncertainty.

Braille

We use a lower case 'b' for braille despite what spell check says. The Royal Institute of the Blind (RNIB) writes it this way.

Days, months and seasons

Days and months should all have capital letters. Use lower case for seasons. Use lower case for new year, but capitals for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

Religious festivals

Should all have capital letters.

Capital letters continued

Government and policy

The Government, when used as a noun referring to the Government of this country, has a capital letter.

Write general terms such as departments, governments and councils in lower case.

Use capitals when referring to particular acts of Parliament such as The Freedom of Information Act.

Groups of people

Do not use capital letters for groups of people, for example, older people, people with mental health illness, young people.

This also applies to generic job or service titles. See **jobs, teams and services** below.

Headings

Write all headings in sentence case. This means you only use a capital letter at the start of the first word of the heading, unless you are using names, proper nouns, abbreviations and acronyms. Do not use all capitals or underlining. Do not put a full stop at the end of a heading.

Illnesses and conditions

Only use a capital letter for an illness or condition if it is named after someone.

Examples

Crohn's disease, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, diabetes.

Capital letters continued

Jobs, teams and services

If you are not using the proper name of the services do not use initial capitals. In others words, use lower case.

Examples

Adult social care services is a description of the services provided, not the name of a specfic service or division. Adult Social Care is the name of the directorate that provides these services.

Write individual's job titles with initial capitals, for example, the Director of Public Health. Write generic job titles in lower case.

Examples

There are 50 social workers and 30 environmental health officers coming to the event. The Service Director of Children and Families will give a presentation.

Nationalities and ethnicities

Use initial capitals for nationalities and languages - English, Asian, African-Caribbean. Don't use capitals for adjectives such as black, white, minority ethnic.

You should refer to specific ethnic groups where possible.

Places

Use initial capitals for the whole name - Sandwell Valley Country Park, Wednesbury Museum.

Colons and semicolons

Use colons to introduce lists, quotes, examples and to link contrasting statements. Use them instead of 'and' or 'but'. Do not use a capital letter after a colon unless the word would have a capital letter normally.

Use semicolons to punctuate bullet-pointed lists in formal documents (see bullet points on page…). Use them to separate two very closely related sentences; or in word groups that already contain commas, to avoid clutter.

Commas

Commas "serve a logical purpose, usually to separate different thoughts or nuances within a sentence" (Collins Complete Writing Guide).

Examples

Our Manager, Jane Smith, admits she is picky about grammar.

Personal Assistant Andrew Brown has been awarded a certificate of excellence.

In the first sentence we could have left out the name of the manager. However, we chose to add in this additional information. In the second sentence the fact that Andrew Brown is a PA was important information that was needed to convey our message. It would not have been meaningful if his name was left out.

Dates and times

Dates

Writes dates like this: Monday 23 July 2023. Do not use 'the' before a date, 'of' in the middle of it or use 'st', 'th', 'rd' or 'nd'.

Times

Write times using numbers. Put a full stop between the hour and the minutes and then either am or pm, with no space after the last number.

Where there are no zeros write the time without the minutes.

Dates and times continued

Times continued

Examples

12.30pm, 10.15am, 12noon, 12midnight, 7am, 6.30pm

Time spans: you can either use '12noon-10pm' or 'from 12noon to 10pm' (see also section on hyphens and dashes). Do not mix these two styles within one document.

Decades

Write decades in numerals followed by an 's', with no apostrophe: 1960s, 2010s.

Ellipsis (written as …)

Do not use ellipses except in a very conversational style or to abbreviate quoted text.

Exclamation mark (!)

Do not use an exclamation mark unless it is necessary to convey meaning. Use it show anger, scorn, disgust, sarcasm, shock, irony, surprise or after an insult or command. We would rarely need to use it in official communications.

Full stops

Only put one space after a full stop. This is the standard practice for both online and print production.

See also abbreviations on page 12.

Hyphens and dashes

There is a difference between a hyphen and a dash. A hyphen is shorter and there are two types of dashes (see below).

Hyphens

Words should be hyphenated if they:
- make no sense if used on their own
- are linked together in some way
- need hyphens to get rid of ambiguity.

Examples

Six-foot wall - can you have a six wall or a foot wall? They don't make sense on their own so should be hyphenated.

Ten-year-old child, much-needed policy - the adjectives are linked.

What's the difference between a man-eating shark and a man eating shark?

If in doubt, at least make sure that if you hyphenate a word at the start of a document, you continue to hyphenate it throughout.

Use one word with no hyphen whenever this is possible. Hyphens tend to clutter up text.

Hyphens are often used in printed text to split up words that will not fit on a line. You should never split a word across a line in this way as it does not comply with guidance on accessibility.

Hyphens should not be used in any other circumstances. See dashes below.

Dashes

There are two types of dashes. A short one called an en dash and a longer one called an em dash. We use the shorter dash in our publications. The shortcut for this in Word is ctrl + minus button.

Hyphens and dashes continued

Dashes continued

Use a dash in these situations.

- Instead of brackets, when something is said as an aside, afterthought or explanation.
- To introduce an example of something that has gone before.
- To show sequences or periods of time.

Examples

The 24 hour clock - which we use more and more these days - can be confusing for many people.

We have to consider two main things when producing information for the council - branding and accessibility.

1-5, 1960-1970, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri

Numbers

Spell out numbers one to nine. Numbers 10 or more should be written as figures. You can use figures for all numbers when they appear in tables, as percentages or costs.

Write one million, two thousand, sixty thousand and so on. This avoids potential mistakes with the number of zeros on the end of a large number. You would still write 1,345,300 for example

Never start a sentence with a figure, always spell it out.

Examples

Three people from our team went to the awards ceremony. There were about 400 people there. .

Obliques (written as /)

As obliques can be used to mean 'or' or 'and' they can be confusing. Avoid using them unless it will make text too long and affect formatting. Do not put spaces before or after the oblique.

Paragraphs

The length of a paragraph depends very much on the complexity of the subject matter. Sometimes you need to read quite a lot about one small point to make yourself clear. At other times, a couple of sentences is enough.

To make documents as readable as possible, give the reader small chunks of information at a time.

Use as few paragraphs as possible and as many as necessary. If you are creating a complex document, use subheadings to break up the information.

Quotation marks

Direct speech

Use double quotes ("") at the start and end of a quote. Use single quotes ('') if you need to put a quote within a quote. Introduce the quote with a colon.

Examples

Harjit said: "I went to an exhibition this weekend."

It's really wet," said Jane, "and I don't have an umbrella."

Punctuation marks go inside the final quotation mark if they relate to the quoted words, but outside if they relate to the whole sentence.

If you are quoting direct speech you must quote it exactly as the person said it, **not** an approximation of what they said.

Use single quotes ('') if you are stating the name of a book, play or film, or when quoting a section from a report or speech.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Microsoft Word Reading Ages

The Flesch-Kincaid score grades your writing on readability. If the score is high, the sentence is more readable. To find this in Microsoft Word, follow these instructions:

1. Select "File", and then select "Options".
2. Select "Proofing".
3. Make sure "Show readability statistics" is selected.

Ideally you should be aiming for a score of 70 or higher.

Flesch Reading Ease

Score	Style
90 - 100	Very easy
80 - 90	Easy
70 - 80	Fairly easy
60 - 70	Standard
50 - 60	Fairly difficult
30 - 50	Difficult
0 - 30	Very difficult

The A to Z of alternative plain English words

You can search words or phrases, or browse through the A-to-Z pages, and find plain English alternative words to use.

www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html

The Collins Dictionary

The Collins online dictionary classifies words from A1/A2, B1/B2 to C1/C2. The A classified words are readable by beginners and C classified words are for fluent speakers and readers. This can help you to decide whether a word should be used.

www.collinsdictionary.com/

Reading Age checker

You can copy text in to a readability calculator. Avoid putting any confidential information into an online system.

readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

Text Alternatives

A decision tree to guide you on writing better text alternatives for images.

4syllables.com.au/articles/text-alternatives-decision-tree

OUR PLEDGE

Sandwell Public Health team pledge to implement this communication guide robustly, to include:

- Communications to be translated into the four most commonly spoken languages where possible.
- Services commissioned by Sandwell Public Health to offer language support where possible.
- For all written communications produced by Public Health to have a reading age of Grade 8 or lower (Flesch-Kincaid score of 70 or above).
- That we shall use Health Literacy policies in our communications.
- We shall adopt Plain English across all written communications.
- We shall continue different user needs with each communication style we use.

Sandwell Public Health

Acknowledgements