Write in plain English
Training Guide
1279 V4

Learning purpose

Training session 1 – What is plain English?
The difference between plain English and other forms of written English
The advantages of using plain English

Training session 2 – Principles of writing in plain English (Principles 1 & 2)
Keep in mind who your audience is
Make your message clear for your audience

Training session 3 – Principles of writing in plain English (Principles 3 & 4)
Ensure that the text is presented in a logical sequence
Use vocabulary that is easily understood

Training session 4 – What makes plain English plain? (Principles 5 & 6)
Be careful with your sentence length
Make sure your writing is readable

Training review and exercise – Training sessions are reviewed
Summary of the main differences between plain English and other forms of written English

Final exercise
Appendix A: Additional resources for learners
Learning purpose

The purpose of this Training Guide is to help you to write documents in plain English.

Learning Outcome

When you have successfully completed this unit standard you will have:

- Done some thinking about plain English.
- Explored how plain English differs from other forms of written English.
- Considered the advantages of using plain English.
- Acquired a good understanding of the principles of writing in plain English.
- Practised writing documents in plain English.

Level Descriptor

The unit standard is at Level 3 on the National Qualifications Framework. At this level you are expected to be able to:

Carry out processes that:
- Require a range of well-developed skills.
- Offer a significant choice of procedures.
- Are employed within a range of familiar contexts.

Employing:
- Some relevant theoretical knowledge.
- Interpretation of available information.
- Discretion and judgement.
- A range of known responses to familiar problems.

Applied:
- In directed activity with some autonomy.
- Under general supervision and quality checking.
- With significant responsibility for the quantity and quality of output.
- With possible responsibility for the output of others.

This Training Guide contains information and activities to help prepare you for assessment against Unit Standard 1279. You may want to include additional material that you feel is relevant to your particular situation or workplace.

This Training Guide lends itself to group interaction and discussion, so use your imagination and pursue interest areas as you go. Some concepts are quite difficult to learn from paper, which reinforces the value of group interaction. The assessment process is quite involved so you are advised you to read through the assessments before you begin.
Symbols
Throughout this Training Guide different symbols (or icons) are used to highlight the different types of activities. The meanings of these symbols are given below:

Training session
This Training Guide is divided into training sessions based on similar topics. This symbol appears at the start of each training session.

Thinking, or reflection
The image is of a light bulb: a traditional symbol for an idea. Whenever this symbol appears in this Training Guide you are encouraged to take the time to think about what you have learnt to make sure that you really understand the topic.

Try if for yourself, or exercises
The image is of a pair of soccer boots. Becoming expert at something requires practice. This symbol is used in this Training Guide whenever there is an exercise that requires you to practise skills for yourself.

Review
The image is of a pair of binoculars. Reviewing the learning process helps reinforce the training sessions. There is a review section at the end of this Training Guide.
Training session 1 – What is plain English?

Learning Objective
On completion of this training session you are able to explain:

- The difference between plain English and other forms of written English.
- The advantages of using plain English.

Plain English
Does it matter if we write in plain English or not?

What do we actually mean when we talk of “plain English”?

Are there advantages to writing in plain English?

These are the questions that this training session seeks to answer. We start off by briefly defining what plain English is, explore other forms of written English, and then move on to look at some of the advantages of writing in plain English.

Text 1: The Pedigree of the English Language

The English language owes its ancestry to a virile forebear, Germanic, itself a subsidiary branch of Indo European. The migratory and conquestorial thrusts and counter thrusts prevalent in the Europe of the middle ages gave rise to a linguistic cauldron from whose maelstrom English was originally thrust. Constructed phonetically from the Germanic tongue of conquering Angles, Saxons and Jutes and heavily overlaid with Latin morphemes, it also borrowed from the Celt of the native Britons. To this mongrel tongue was later married Norman French and salted with liberal dressings of other languages acquired through trade links and technological advance, giving birth to the vigorous hybrid of today.
Training session 1 – What is plain English?

By comparing the two texts you can immediately see the difference in styles. The first text is difficult to read and to understand. The second text can be read more quickly and is more understandable. You will also agree that the second text gets the message across more clearly than the first.

The second text is an example of the style of writing you should be able to achieve after you have completed the learning in this Training Guide.

Our aim in writing plain English is not to produce flowing prose or gain literary acclaim. It is not even to entertain, although keeping people interested is important. The objective is to get the message across as clearly as possible.

Text 2: Where English Comes from

English is a mixture of other languages. It is based firstly on an ancient language called Germanic. This language was spoken by tribes from the areas we now call Germany and Scandinavia who invaded England in the Middle Ages. This language was mixed with Celtic, which the people already spoke, and Latin, spoken by the Romans who used to rule England.

Later the Normans from France also invaded England bringing the French language with them. Gradually still more words from other languages were added as England became a great trading country. The English you now speak and write comes from this mix.
Training session 1 – What is plain English?

**A brief definition of plain English**

Writing in plain English really means writing so that your meaning is clearly understood by your audience. It refers to writing in a simple, straightforward way that has only one possible meaning for the people you are writing to. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by language they find difficult to understand. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily.

Using the term “plain English” may be a little misleading because the principles you will learn about in this Training Guide can be applied to any language, not just English.

The aim of plain English is not to “dumb down” the text or to make it overly simple. When we oversimplify text there is a danger that part of the meaning will be lost or altered.

The main aim of plain English is to communicate information in the most efficient manner possible.

As children we were probably encouraged by our parents and teachers to use a wide vocabulary and to learn many different words. At school we learn how to form complex sentences, and this process continues if we continue our education at university or at other tertiary institutions.

After learning this “academic English” many of us are then reluctant, or find it difficult, to write in plain English.

However, many of the words we use when we write are quite unnecessary. There are many occasions when long-winded, complex phrases could be replaced by a single word or two that are just as effective.
Try it for yourself!

Read the phrases in the first column opposite, and then in the second column simplify the phrases into as few words as possible. The first three have been done as examples for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Phrase</th>
<th>Simplified Phrase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We will be in a position to…</td>
<td>We can</td>
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<tr>
<td>First and foremost…</td>
<td>First…</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is something I could possibly consider…</td>
<td>I might consider it…</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is an issue I would like to discuss with you in regard to…</td>
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<tr>
<td>There are a number of questions that we should raise…</td>
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<tr>
<td>He stated that it would be ready in a short period of time…</td>
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<tr>
<td>In spite of the fact that he had missed the train…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I replied in the affirmative and said…</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notwithstanding the many reasons given…</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Using plain English means using words and structures which communicate clearly and simply with the widest possible audience. Newspapers try to do this by aiming at a reading age of around 12 to 14 years for most of their articles.

As you progress through this Training Guide you will practise various aspects of writing documents in plain English, so that ultimately you are able to apply that knowledge to much of what you write every day. In that way you will be reasonably sure that most people will understand what you have written.
The mind map outline below gives some examples of other forms of written English. How do you think these other forms of English differ from “plain English”?

Other forms of written English

Other forms of written English

- Counter culture usages like rap, surfing, bike.
- Humour.
- Imagery.
- Jargon, slang.
- Literary genres (poems, drama, etc).
- Technical language used by various professional groups, such as doctors, lawyers, scientists, academics, etc.
- The speech of second language speakers.

Consider the language used by professional groups, different classes of people, and the language used for particular occasions, activities and circumstances. Also think of the use, unintentionally or deliberately, of unclear writing for humour, deception, to inflict pain or to avoid trouble.
What are the advantages of plain English?

You probably came up with quite a few ideas about the different ways we can express ourselves when we write in English. All forms of English writing serve a purpose and are therefore important. If they weren’t important we wouldn’t bother to write that way at all!

So what is so important about writing in plain English? Or to put it another way, what in fact are the advantages of writing in plain English?

Our lawmakers have only recently identified a need to write legislation in plain English.

A suggestion for the trainer: First, ask the trainees to write down some more ideas on the mind map. Then after a short period of time ask them to discuss their answers in pairs or threes before reporting back to you with their conclusions. You can then highlight both the advantages of being clearly understood and the disadvantages of not being understood.

Some advantages of writing in plain English are given on the mind map outline below. What other advantages can you think of? Why are these advantages important in getting your message across?

- Readers are more likely to read the document. They are less likely to be put off or intimidated by it.
- Easier to skim read for meaning.
- It saves time in both reading and writing.
- Easier for non-English speakers to understand.
- Reaches the widest possible audience.
- Misunderstandings and their consequences (anger, mistrust, confusion, fear, guilt etc) are less likely to occur.
- Can get a clear message across in emergencies.
- It saves time in both reading and writing.
- Easier for non-English speakers to understand.
- Reaches the widest possible audience.
- Misunderstandings and their consequences (anger, mistrust, confusion, fear, guilt etc) are less likely to occur.
- Can get a clear message across in emergencies.
The use of English which is not plain is the basis of much of our humour and embarrassment. Ridiculous uses, misunderstandings, irony, ambiguity, pun, and sarcasm all contribute. Can you think of some ways that English can be misused to create these effects?

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**A suggestion for the trainer:**

Examining some of this humour (what is it in the unclear nature of the language used which makes this joke or cartoon funny) might be useful here for the trainees? Collecting samples of communications that caused embarrassment, misunderstanding or humour is another possibility.

You may also find it worthwhile to explore with your the trainees how relationships are affected by our use of plain English. Our language style affects how people perceive us: in letters and job applications, for instance.
Training session 1 – What is plain English?

If you write for an audience using a style of language that you know well but which is not well known to people outside your narrow group (and especially not your audience), you will not be using plain English.

For example, how plain is the language of surfing or skateboarding to your parents?

If your mother was a “grommet”, could she “hang 10”? Who knows – but she might not be impressed if you asked her!

Come to think of it, can your dad “ollie”, “flip kick” or “hand plant”?!?

We can say the same thing about cricket. If you are interested in cricket, you will know what it means to be “caught plumb lbw by a Yorker”, but to anyone else it is not plain English!

Of course, in some highly specific or technical situations there is a need to use very precise terms in technical language that is understood by a specific group of people.

Here are some examples:

- A surgeon who leaves details about an operation.
- Computer programmers who write to each other about a computer problem.
- Scientists who describe the findings of their research in a journal for other scientists.

In these situations people are using English which is only “plain” to their limited audience.

Where possible, it is better to write in plain English as you will be understood by more people. There will be less ambiguity (double meaning), confusion and misunderstanding.

Your communication will be more direct with shorter, simpler sentences or less jargon, and your ideas will be expressed more directly.

An added benefit is that people who are not native English speakers will be more likely to understand what you write as well.
Training session 2 – Principles of writing in plain English

(Principles 1 & 2)

Learning Objective
On completion of this training session you are able to explain the following principles of writing in plain English:

• Principle 1: Keep in mind who your audience is.
• Principle 2: Make your message clear for your audience.

Principle 1:
Keep in mind who your audience is.

Take a moment to think of a time when you were talking casually with your friends and then your teacher or boss appeared? Did your conversation suddenly become more polite and formal? Quite possibly it did.

The reason this happens is because the situation has changed. At that moment [the occasion] your audience has grown to include a new person. What you then talk about [the subject matter and content] may also change. When it comes to writing in plain English, the same thing should happen. You need to think of your audience, the occasion, and the subject matter as you write.

These factors will affect the way you write just as they would affect the way you speak. Just for a moment, imagine that you own a graphic equaliser that controls your writing instead of sound.

It could look like this:

This graphic equaliser controls three important parts of your writing – the content (what you put into it), tone (how you put it across), and format (how you lay it out).

You will need to adjust each of these factors depending on the situation, occasion, audience and subject matter. For example, you would probably write a letter to your parents differently from a letter written to your boss.
Training session 2 – Principles of writing in plain English
(Principles 1 & 2)

One way to ensure that the content, tone and format fit the situation, occasion, subject matter and audience is to imagine that you are having a face-to-face interaction with the reader.

Write your text as if that person is standing in front of you listening to you.

You can do this by thinking about the reader (your audience) and considering these questions:

- Who is going to read what I have written?
  For example: Is English the reader’s first or second language? Does my audience consist of mainly young people, more adult people, or a mixture of both?

- What is it that I want to say (the subject)?
  In other words: What is the topic of my writing? Am I going to be speaking about the environment or giving instructions about the use of a fire extinguisher? Or what?

- Do my readers have prior knowledge of the subject? What information needs to be included in the text?
  In other words: Is this completely new information or are my readers familiar with some of it? This will affect the content of what I will write.

- What research do I need to do to ensure that the information is accurate and current, and appropriate for my readers?

- What tone should I use?
  For example: Will my writing need to be formal rather than less formal? Will I be writing instructions for my readers or giving them information?

These are some of the types of questions you need to ask yourself in order to be clear about who your readers are and how you should write your document.
Principle 2:
Make your message clear for your audience.

When you have established who your audience is your next step is to ensure that those who read your text understand the message you are communicating.

Ambiguity
One of the factors that can block your clear message, or cause misunderstanding, is ambiguity in your writing.

Ambiguity means there is more than one possible meaning in the words. If your writing is ambiguous it could cause confusion and mistakes. In some cases it may even lead to serious consequences!
Look at the sentences opposite. Can you see the double meaning (ambiguity) in each of them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The policeman arrested a man in a green car with brown hair.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You will be lucky to get Bob to work for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recommend Mary with no qualifications for the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste no time hiring Patrick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[A notice in a laundry] Please remove your clothes as soon as the light goes out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you work them out? Some of the sentences may seem unambiguous to you and their meanings quite clear, but each one of them can be understood in two different ways.

You may need someone else to point out different meanings for some of those sentences.

The intended meaning of some of the sentences may, of course, become clearer when they are spoken because of the use of emphasis and tone of voice.
Now try and make the sentences on the previous page unambiguous. Write your answers opposite. Remember that in plain English each sentence needs to have only one possible meaning. The first two have been done as examples for you.

- The policeman arrested a man in a green car with brown hair.
- The policeman arrested a man with brown hair who was driving a green car.

You will be lucky to get Bob to work for you.

- It is not likely that you will get Bob to work for you

I recommend Mary with no qualifications for the job.

Waste no time hiring Patrick.

[A notice in a laundry] Please remove your clothes as soon as the light goes out.

A suggestion for the trainer: An alternative is to ask trainees to discuss their answers in small groups and report their suggestions to you. If you have only one or two trainees they could discuss their answers with you directly.
Grammatical structures
A second factor that can prevent your readers from clearly understanding what you have written is the poor use of grammatical structures.

To keep things reasonably simple we will focus on four things: the use of active words, the use of passive words, nominalisations, and punctuation.

Use active verbs
An important key to writing in plain English is to use active verbs rather than passive verbs. Why is this important?

It is important because passive verbs often make sentences longwinded, ambiguous, impersonal and boring. Active verbs make your writing simpler, less formal, clearer and more precise.

When we use active verbs the agent (subject) comes before the verb and the object after the verb.

An example of this is the following sentence:

Ann is playing tennis

(agent or subject) (active verb) (object)

When we use passive verbs we reverse the order:

Tennis was played by Ann

(object) (passive verb) (agent)

Here are a few more examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive verbs</th>
<th>Active verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was agreed by the committee…</td>
<td>The committee agreed…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the last meeting a report was made by the Secretary…</td>
<td>At the last meeting the Secretary reported…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This form should be signed and returned to me.</td>
<td>You should sign the form and return it to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The warning signs should have been put out by the cleaner.</td>
<td>The cleaner should have put warning signs out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment should have been written by you in ink.</td>
<td>You should have written the assessment in ink.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All the sentences opposite are written using passive verbs. Rewrite them using an active verb.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Sentence</th>
<th>Active Verb Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The tests should have been finished by the engineers yesterday.</td>
<td>The engineers finished the tests yesterday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fire alarm was set off today by the Health and Safety officer.</td>
<td>The Health and Safety officer set off the fire alarm today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The computer was not shut down correctly by the student</td>
<td>The student did not shut down the computer correctly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How did it go? Did you manage to rewrite the sentences without losing the meaning of the original sentences? Did they make sense after you had rewritten them?

Remember, we write in plain English so that our readers are able to understand clearly what we have written.
Make good use of passive verbs

Now, having said that you should try to use active verbs when you write, this does not mean that you should not use any passive verbs. Sometimes, what we have to say just appears better in the passive voice.

When you do use passive verbs, though, you should avoid having more than one or two on a page – and use them well when you do!

Here are a few examples of how you can do that.

- Use a passive verb to make a sentence less hostile.
  “This bill hasn’t been paid”, rather than: “You have not paid this bill”.

- Use a passive verb when you don’t know who the doer is.
  “The computer was stolen last night.” (We don’t know who stole it.)

- Use a passive verb if it sounds better than using an active verb.
  We normally write: “I was born in 1962”, rather than: “My mother bore me in 1962”.

Avoid words formed from verbs (nominalisations)

These words are like passive verbs, usually dull and heavy-going. Below are some examples of nominalisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Nominalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>introduce</td>
<td>introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide</td>
<td>provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apply</td>
<td>application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Can you think of any nominalisations? You could write them down in the boxes opposite.

**A suggestion for the trainer:** You may need to think of some of these words beforehand for the trainees, especially words that may be used in your local context.
Training session 2 – Principles of writing in plain English

(Principles 1 & 2)

Use punctuation carefully
Punctuation is a very important part of writing. When you speak to other people you use pauses, as well as giving emphasis and expression to certain words.

Your use of tone (emphasis) and modulation (the way your voice falls and rises as you speak) allows you to get your point across clearly.

Punctuation plays this role in the written word.

When you use full stops, commas and other punctuation marks in the right places in your text, it makes your writing much easier to understand.
Think of the different forms of punctuation you have observed in things you have read or that you have used in your own writing. Write down as many symbols for these forms of punctuation as you can, in the spaces opposite. Three of them are done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full stop</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>ellipsis</td>
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<tr>
<td>exclamation mark</td>
<td>!</td>
<td>question mark</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colon</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>dash</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parenthesis</td>
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<td>apostrophe</td>
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<td>brackets</td>
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<td>slash</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comma</td>
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<td>semicolon</td>
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<tr>
<td>quotation marks</td>
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<td>hyphen</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**A suggestion for the trainer:** You may need to think of some of these symbols beforehand for the trainees, especially symbols that may be used in your local context.

When the above exercise has been completed and discussed, you may realise that you have found out about some punctuation marks that you are not too sure how to use. Ask the trainer to explain their use to you.

You also need to keep in mind that using capital letters at the beginning of sentences is also part of punctuation in writing.
Have a look at the text in the table opposits. You will quickly see that it has no punctuation in it at all. Your task is to rewrite the text and insert punctuation where appropriate so that the text makes sense.

the Prime Minister has said and I quote the government has done nothing wrong in funding a fact sheet about the Labour Party out of taxpayer’s money who is she fooling certainly not the ordinary person in the street here are a few reasons why it is wrong it is promoting one party the Labour Party above other parties it is electioneering it is using taxpayers money that could have been used to fund the health sector and or education what can we do about it well we could simply just ignore it do nothing otherwise we could protest about it by writing to our local newspaper and MP maybe we could even decide to refuse to pay taxes not that is easily done
Having finished the task on the previous page you may have discovered that there are various ways in which we can use punctuation. You may well have punctuated the text a little differently from other trainees and still be correct.

Remember, if your sentence structure seems illogical or causes confusion to your readers, you may need to look at your grammar. The grammar used throughout your text should be accurate and consistent. The correct use of verbs and punctuation in your writing makes a big difference in ensuring that your readers understand what you have written.

We often do not realise how important these factors are until we are faced with numerous errors, or a lack of correct punctuation, in a text that we are reading. The text then becomes confusing and, sometimes, even unreadable. So take care with your writing!
Training session 3 – Principles of writing in plain English
(Principles 3 & 4)

Learning Objective
On completion of this training session you are able to explain the following principles of writing in plain English:

• Principle 3: Ensure that the text is presented in a logical sequence.
• Principle 4: Use vocabulary that is easily understood.

Principle 3:
Ensure that the text is presented in a logical sequence.

We write in plain English so that our readers can easily understand and follow our thoughts, ideas, information or opinions. When we jumble these up in our writing we confuse our readers and make it more difficult for them to read and understand what we have written.

Our aim is therefore to write in such a way that there is a logical sequence to our thoughts and ideas. One thought or idea needs to lead on to the next logical idea or thought. In that way, whoever is reading the documents we write will be able to follow clearly what we are trying to convey.

On the following page are two transcripts from the same car accident scene. One is taken from the disoriented driver, and the other from a witness to the accident.

As you read these transcripts, look at how the speakers group and connect their ideas, feelings, thoughts and opinions.
Training session 3 – Principles of writing in plain English

Transcript 1: Disoriented driver
“What happened? What are you doing?
He came out of nowhere.
What’s going on?
My neck…
My leg is killing me!
We were rolling, I was shopping, is the car alright?
Who hit me?
Where am I?
I couldn’t stop!”

Transcript 2: Witness to the accident
“She’s conscious and complaining of a sore neck so be careful how you move her.
She’s trapped in the driver’s seat. The clutch has pinned her left foot.
Some idiot ran a red light and ploughed right into the passenger door. The impact rolled the car right over.”
Notice how the victim is so stressed and confused that the ideas and information she gives are all jumbled up and incoherent?

We can illustrate the logical sequence of the second transcript in the following way:

- **The condition of the victim.**
  - She’s conscious and complaining of a sore neck so be careful how you move her.

- **The situation of the victim**
  - She’s trapped in the driver’s seat. The clutch has pinned her left foot.

- **How it all happened**
  - Some idiot ran a red light and ploughed right into the passenger door. The impact rolled the car right over.

The boxes show the sequence of the writing, demonstrating its logical order. It would be difficult to do the same thing using the dialogue from the accident victim.
Training session 3 – Principles of writing in plain English

(Principles 3 & 4)

You can make use of boxes, as illustrated on the previous page, to plan out a logical sequence for your writing. For example, if a reporter was writing up a local newspaper report of what happened at the accident scene, he/she might plan the article by using boxes in this way:

Those involved in the accident

How it happened

Injuries sustained

What happened afterwards

The article might read something like this:

“Sandra Jellyman got the fright of her life on August the 17th this year.

Mrs Jellyman was driving south along Elton Avenue when a red Subaru collided into her passenger seat. The Subaru was travelling east down Sensor Street and had gone through a red light. The impact caused Mrs Jellyman’s car to roll. Her left foot was trapped in the accident and it took emergency services 45 minutes to get her out of the car. Her left ankle was broken and she had some minor whiplash injuries.

Today Mrs Jellyman walks with a limp. The person responsible for the accident fled the scene and has not been found. The red Subaru was a stolen vehicle. “

Can you see how the reporter has taken the details of the accident and written them in a logical sequence which makes the report coherent and easy to read? The report follows the logical pattern as set out in the boxes, and all information relating to each main idea is brought together.

You will need to do the same thing if you are going to achieve your objective of writing in plain English.
Opposite is a short excerpt [193 words] from the science fiction story “Ryemouria” written by Phil Lewis.

The sentences and/or paragraphs have been jumbled up. Your task is to sort them out so that they flow in a logical sequence. You will need to think about this carefully as it is not as easy as it seems!

You may find it helpful to make use of numbered boxes, as demonstrated, to sort out these sentences and/or paragraphs into a logical order.

On the following page the extract is written in its correct and logical order. But do not turn the page until you have had a go yourself!

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>He bent down and held Evelyn’s head in his arm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Crushing the man’s throat, she dropped him and pulled the spear out. Blood gushed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Evelyn stood in a circle of ten or so savages all at a height just above her knees. Blood could be seen on her face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Farrell pushed his wood shovel down into the murky water and brought out another scoop of mud. Standing a moment at rest, he heard Evelyn scream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>One lifted a stone axe preparing to throw it, but Farrell threw him aside also. The others had then decided that they had had enough and ran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Farrell came running up as Evelyn fell to the ground. Farrell grabbed two of the men, his hand grasping their arms, flinging them nearly five metres through the air. He hit the heads of two others crushing them on impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>It only took a second for Farrell to leap out of the water up over the bank.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Two of the savages already lay at Evelyn’s feet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Another then ran toward her thrusting a large stone tipped spear up into her side. She grabbed it and the savage at the same time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Farrell pushed his wood shovel down into the murky water and brought out another scoop of mud. Standing a moment at rest, he heard Evelyn scream. It only took a second for Farrell to leap out of the water up over the bank.

Evelyn stood in a circle of ten or so savages all at a height just above her knees. Blood could be seen on her face. Two of the savages already lay at Evelyn’s feet. Another then ran toward her thrusting a large stone tipped spear up into her side. She grabbed it and the savage at the same time.

Crushing the man’s throat, she dropped him and pulled the spear out. Blood gushed. Farrell came running up as Evelyn fell to the ground. Farrell grabbed two of the men, his hand grasping their arms, flinging them nearly five metres through the air. He hit the heads of two others crushing them on impact.

One lifted a stone axe preparing to throw it, but Farrell threw him aside also. The others had then decided that they had had enough and ran. He bent down and held Evelyn’s head in his arm.

Did you sort out the sentences into groups of main ideas first before trying to get them into logical order?

What about the use of numberedboxes? Did you use them and did they help?

Remember, your objective is to write in plain English. When you sort your ideas and information into a logical sequence, you are well on the way to reaching your objective.
Training session 3 – Principles of writing in plain English

(Principles 3 & 4)

**Principle 4:**
Use vocabulary that is easily understood.

The words we use in our documents need to fit the occasion and the purpose of our writing if they are to be understood by those who read them.

**Word Selection:**
Accurate use of words is an important part of most writing because it helps the reader to clearly understand what you are writing about.

If a word is used or spelt incorrectly it may change the whole meaning of the text or make it non-sensible and often humorous.
The following sentences show how incorrect words or spelling can confuse meaning.

“My colleagues were late so I gave a eulogy to my boss on their behalf.”

The word “eulogy” has been used incorrectly. The correct word is “apology.” (A eulogy is given at a funeral.)

“The hair bounced right over to me and ate grass out of my hand. I didn’t realise a hair had such long ears.”

The incorrect spelling of the word “hare” used in this context makes complete nonsense of the sentence.

In these two examples, the use of a wrong word has made complete nonsense of the sentences. When this happens it can often be humorous, but sometimes the reader can be completely misled. Also in a more formal context it doesn’t give a good impression – something which is important when you are applying for a job, for example!

In plain English we use words that are familiar, simple, direct and often shorter than in other ways of writing English. We also leave out unnecessary words or replace wordy phrases.

Have a look at how the sentence below changes when simple words are used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A sentence with complex words</th>
<th>The same sentence with simple words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As we noted in the preceding section, if you purchased additional printer options, such as a second printer tray, it is a requirement you verify its correct installation.</td>
<td>As we noted in the previous section, if you bought extra printer equipment, such as a second printer tray, you must check that you install it correctly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both sentences say the same thing, but the one that uses plain English is easier to read and understand.
Each word given in the left column is a more complicated version of a word or phrase in the right column. Your task is to match the more complicated word to its simpler (plain English) equivalent. Use lines to link the correct ones together. One example is done for you.

Where possible, you should consider replacing a few words with one word in your writing. When you use just one word for a number of words you are eliminating a lot of wordiness from the text that you are writing. This in turn makes the text easier to read.

You have to be careful in doing this, because the danger is that you may change the meaning of the sentence in the process. This may alter what you are trying to say to your readers, or make what you have written nonsense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Henceforth</th>
<th>So</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decline</td>
<td>From now on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain</td>
<td>Block</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequently</td>
<td>Get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstruction</td>
<td>Refuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Buy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Look at the examples below, where a few words have been replaced with one word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A few words</th>
<th>One word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at the present time</td>
<td>now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in addition to</td>
<td>besides (also)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the purpose of</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in relation to</td>
<td>about (in, with, towards, to)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See whether you can find a word that can replace the words in the column on the left:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A few words</th>
<th>One word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at a later date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have no alternative but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on a regular basis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avoid jargon or slang
Plain English should reach as wide an audience as possible, and be appropriate to the audience we are writing for.

The best way to do this is to avoid jargon (technical words) or slang (informal alternative words often common to a particular group).

If you need to use technical words, try and put yourself in your reader’s shoes. Questions you can ask yourself are:

“What is easily understood?”

“What needs to be explained?”

“What can be left out?”

It is not insulting to your readers to explain terms clearly, but how much you need to do that is up to you to judge.
Think of the purpose of your writing

Your vocabulary will also depend on what you are trying to achieve. Are you trying to inform, convince, or persuade people? Or are you wanting to explain or reveal something to your readers?

Think of the audience when you choose your vocabulary. Will they understand the words you use?

Look at the examples given in the table below. They show how vocabulary might fit the subject, the writer’s purpose, and the audience in certain situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Writer’s purpose</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health/Fitness</td>
<td>To inform</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>To entertain</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal opinion</td>
<td>To advise</td>
<td>Client</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing</td>
<td>To inform and entertain</td>
<td>Surfers/general youth</td>
<td>Casual, slang, jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>To persuade</td>
<td>Teenage girls</td>
<td>Casual but persuasive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Complete the table opposite by filling in the gaps:

If you select words that are appropriate for your audience and suit the purpose of the occasion, you will more than likely be writing in plain English. Use technical language (jargon) only when necessary, and avoid slang as much as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Writer’s purpose</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone bill</td>
<td>To complain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture on music history</td>
<td></td>
<td>Music students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation ceremony</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answers are indicative only. Many options are available.
Training session 4 – What makes plain English plain?

(Principles 5 & 6)

Learning Objective
On completion of this training session you are able to explain the following principles of writing in plain English:

- Principle 5: Be careful with your sentence length.
- Principle 6: Make sure your writing is readable.

Principle 5:
Be careful with your sentence length.

Another difference that can be observed between plain English and other forms of written English is how long the sentences are in the text.
Have a look at the two texts opposite. What is the difference between them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 1</th>
<th>Text 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I refer to my letter of 20th November and am writing to advise you that if we do not hear from you within the next fourteen days, we shall have no alternative but to arrange for your account to be handed over to a credit agency for collection.</td>
<td>We have not yet received a reply to our letter of 20th November. If we do not hear from you within fourteen days, we shall have to hand your outstanding account to a credit agency for collection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fill in the gaps in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text 1</th>
<th>Text 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More difficult to read.</td>
<td>2 sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 words in one sentence.</td>
<td>Easier to understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two main issues (previous letter; new action) in one sentence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Training session 4 – What makes plain English plain?

(Available 5 & 6)

**Average sentence length**
The issue that has been highlighted on the previous page is that of sentence length in writing. An appropriate average sentence length for most forms of writing is 15 to 20 words, especially when you write in plain English.

As you will have observed from the examples on the previous page, the first text has a sentence length of 48 words which causes the reader to lose track of what is being said. The second text breaks the sentence into two, separating what has happened in the past from what will happen in the future. Notice also that only 37 words are used [13 in the first sentence and 24 in the second] making the text less wordy.

Keeping an average sentence length of between 15 and 20 words makes the sentence short enough to be clear and easily understood. It is also long enough to get the point across and allow the text to flow nicely.

**Vary sentence length**
Another good trick to keep your writing interesting is to vary your sentence length. For example, you could use a short sentence followed by a longer sentence, and then a short one again.

In Text 2 on the previous page you can see a simple example of this: first a short sentence then a longer one. Using short and long sentences in this way makes the text come to life.
Beware of complex sentences

Where possible, you should avoid using more than one main point per sentence. This will reduce the length of the sentence and make it more readable. Again, you can see this demonstrated in Text 2 on page 41.

Sometimes it is necessary to use a complex sentence. In these cases, try to place the main clause first because it gives readers a context in which to interpret the other clauses.

This point is illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>If you live away from home to study, you’ll get an accommodation benefit to help you with your accommodation costs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>You’ll get an accommodation benefit to help you with your accommodation costs if you live away from home to study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Read the text opposite. It is an extract of a speech given in Auckland by the British Prime Minister in 2006. In its written form it only has three sentences but uses 156 words! Underline the main clause [the one containing the main idea] in each of the first two sentences.

Extract of a speech given by Tony Blair to the New Zealand Chamber of Commerce on 28 March 2006

“I would also like to take the opportunity, since we are at an event for the Chamber of Commerce, just to say that, I mean I was talking light-heartedly about Europe a moment or two ago, but there is a lot of change that is happening in Europe today as well and that change needs probably to happen faster and further. But I think there are signs that the European Union understands that if it is going to compete in the modern world it does that best by being open to it, by taking down some of the barriers of trade, and I hope very much that we have a world trade round that answers the needs of the world to make sure that we open up our commercial markets and recognise that in the end, by the process of opening up, we all benefit. But again your influence and pressure on that will be important.”

Now imagine that you are Tony Blair’s speechwriter. Using what you have learned so far in this lesson, rewrite the text using more appropriate sentences in order to make his speech more readable. No doubt you will find that there are a lot of extra words that can be eliminated in the process! Think carefully as you rewrite the text! You don’t want to lose any of the meaning of what he said.

Use the space on the following page:
Well, how did that go? It’s not easy at first. It takes a while to decide what is important and how you can simplify a text, but it is worth the effort.

Don’t underestimate the importance of how you use sentences!
Principle 6:
Make sure your writing is readable.

We have said a lot about making sure that our sentences are not too long and that we vary their length. However, there are a number of other things we need to bear in mind if we are to write in plain English.

Layout
It is important that when we write in plain English we also make proper use of paraphrases, sentences and spacing.

When we need to include many rules, consequences or conditions in our writing we should consider using lists, otherwise the writing becomes complicated and hard to read.

These things can help our readers understand the message we want to convey.

So, some of the questions you could ask yourself are:

- How should I break up the text?
- What is an appropriate or logical way to lay it out?
- Is it appropriate to use headings?
- Should I consider using bullet points?

Remember to group your work into main ideas which can then become your paragraphs. The text for this Training Guide has been formatted to make it easy to read and understand.
Proofread your writing

Remember to proofread your writing to see if it makes sense. If possible, read it aloud to see if your writing flows well. Check for things like adequate use of punctuation, correct words, and spelling. Does your writing look readable?

If you have too few paragraphs it will probably overwhelm your readers. On the other hand, if your sentences are all very short, your writing may appear childish.

Remember, if you cannot understand what you’ve written, other readers will most likely have difficulty as well!

Where possible, get someone else to proofread your writing. We can often miss things like spelling errors, duplicate words, and so on because we are too familiar with our own text. It is easier for someone else who is seeing the text for the first time to pick up such errors.

Stick to your brief

A brief is the set of instructions you receive which determines what your final piece of writing should look like. These instructions may relate to:

- The content of the text (the information in it).
- The tone of the text (casual, semi-formal, formal, instructional).
- Format of the text (what it looks like to the reader).
- The occasion (what the text is for).
- The subject matter (the topic of the text).
- The audience (who your readers will be).

It is always important to know what your brief is as it will help you in your writing. Where necessary, ask questions to understand your brief correctly.
Imagine that you had an accident in a car belonging to your workplace. You had been travelling along in the car when the traffic lights turned red and you stopped. However, the car behind you did not! The damage was not too bad but you were shaken up a bit. No serious injuries though!

Now you are going to practise writing in plain English using all the principles you have learnt in this workbook!

Your brief is the following:

- On separate sheets of paper, write two documents about the accident in plain English (of no more than 300 words each).
- The first document is to be a short report for your manager at your workplace giving him/her details of what had happened. Your manager will use this report to make an insurance claim for the damages.
- The second document is to be a short letter to your parents (who are overseas at the moment) letting them know about the accident and describing what happened to you.

Your trainer will have a look at your two documents and may point out some ways you can improve them.

Remember, the only way you will really learn to write well in plain English is to practise! If you are not used to doing a lot of writing this will seem difficult to you at first, but don’t give up. It becomes a little easier each time you practise and you may well surprise yourself – you can really begin to enjoy it!

What is certain though, is that the better you are at writing in plain English the more competent you will feel at your place of learning and also in the workplace. So persevere. Keep at it. It really is worth it!
You have now come to the end of this Training Guide, and the most important thing now is to review and practise the things you have learnt as you worked your way through it.

In the first training session you were given a brief definition of what we mean by plain English. You then learnt about the difference between plain English and other forms of written English. Finally you explored some advantages of writing in plain English.

In the training sessions that followed (training sessions 2-4) you explored six principles of writing in plain English. They are:

- Keep in mind who your audience is.
- Make your message clear for your audience.
- Ensure that the text is presented in a logical sequence.
- Use vocabulary that is easily understood.
- Be careful with your sentence length.
- Make sure your writing is readable.

The following table contains a summary of the main differences between plain English and other forms of written English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Language</th>
<th>Other forms of written English</th>
<th>Plain English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Difficult to understand the meanings of some words, a lot of complex jargon.</td>
<td>Easy to understand, simple words which are in common use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Long or inappropriate. Plenty of repetition using different words.</td>
<td>As short as possible to get the meaning across.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readability</td>
<td>Ideas all over the place. Difficult to follow, understand and concentrate on. Possibly ambiguous and containing redundancies.</td>
<td>Ideas in sequence and logical order. Easily followed. Main ideas first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td>Perhaps all in one block. Confusing, uninteresting, boring. May distract from understanding.</td>
<td>Clear, suits the subject, spaced out appropriately. Is usually more spread out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final exercise

Try this as a final exercise.

Imagine that the house you were living in was flooded by storm water. It did quite a lot of damage but no one was injured. Although you had to evacuate the house, you were able to return to it two days later after the mess was cleaned up.

Your local newspaper is running a competition for the best news report sent to them. Write a report of between 200-400 words for them describing what happened that day. Remember to write in plain English.

Now it’s up to you. The more you practise writing in plain English the better you will get at it. In turn, you will be more effective in your written communication with people.
Appendix A: Additional resources

You may find the following websites useful:

www.plainenglish.co.uk
www.plainenglish.gov
www.write.co.nz/mainsite/PlainEnglish.html
You have now completed the learning process for:

1279 V4 Write in plain English

Your trainer will advise you when and how you will be assessed on what you have learnt in this Training Guide.

Trainer’s attestation
Through the accuracy and quality of the trainee’s responses to questions and activities in this Training Guide, I believe that the trainee has demonstrated a level of knowledge and skills that indicates he/she is ready for assessment on Unit Standard 1279.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature

Date