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26Ten

# Communicate Clearly

A guide to plain English  
from 26Ten

3rd Edition

a b c d e f  
g h i j k l  
m n o p q r  
s t u v w x  
y z 0 1 2 3  
4 5 6 7 8 9

**26Ten**

Get the tools for life

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### **Acknowledgement of country**

We recognise the deep histories and cultures of the Aboriginal people of Lutruwita/Tasmania, the land's first storytellers. We acknowledge Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the traditional and continuing custodians of the land, waters and sky. We pay respect to the Elders, past and present, who hold the memories, traditions, culture and knowledge of Country. We extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose Countries were never ceded.



# Contents

## About this guide 1

About 26Ten	2
How clear communication supports all Tasmanians	3

## What is plain English 4

Plain English – before and after	4
What are the benefits of plain English?	5
Easy Read – another form of clear communication	6
Getting started with plain English	6

## Steps from start to finish 7

<b>Step 1: Think about your reader and purpose</b>	<b>8</b>
Know who you are writing for and why	8
Keep your reader in mind as you write	8
<b>Step 2: Organise your information</b>	<b>9</b>
Use plenty of signposts	9
Use clear paragraphs	9
Keep content as short as possible	9
<b>Step 3: Write your content</b>	<b>10</b>
Be personal	10
Use everyday words	10
Keep sentences short	10
Use the active voice	11
Know when to use the passive voice	12
Avoid using nouns made from verbs	12
Remove unnecessary words and phrases	13

Be consistent	14
Be specific	14
Spell out abbreviations	14
Use questions and answers	15
<b>Step 4: Check what you have written</b>	<b>16</b>
Edit carefully	16
Test your content before you send or publish it	17
Use readability tools as a guide only	17
Use a house style guide	18
<b>Step 5: Design and produce your content</b>	<b>19</b>
Choose a readable font	19
Make the font large enough	19
Make important points stand out clearly	20
Use left aligned text	20
Use images with care	20
Watch your line spacing	21
Avoid background images	22
Use good quality paper	22
Avoid shadowing on print formats	22
Choose a good contrast	22
Use colour and shading with care	22
<b>Spreading the word</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendices &amp; Checklists</b>	<b>24</b>
Appendix 1: A handy summary	25
Appendix 2: Checklist for content	28
Appendix 3: Words and phrases to use	29
Appendix 4: Extra resources	33
<b>Your notes</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>More about 26Ten</b>	<b>38</b>

# About this guide

This guide to plain English is for anyone who needs to communicate information to others clearly. It has been put together by 26Ten, which is the name for Tasmania's strategy to lift adult literacy and numeracy skills.

Writing and reading are a big part of how we communicate with each other. Many of us regularly send and receive important information through:

- emails
- forms
- letters
- social media
- job applications
- reports
- policies
- instructions
- signs
- brochures
- websites
- newsletters
- speeches
- contracts.

Studies show that plain English is a style of communication that makes information easier to understand.<sup>1</sup>

The guide brings together a set of plain English techniques and tips. The main section covers how to write and present information clearly. Towards the end you'll find:

- a handy summary
- examples of clear words and phrases to use
- a checklist to help you review your content
- some extra resources.

While the guide is based on English grammar, you don't need to be an expert in grammar to be able to use it, and to write and speak in plain English.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For various studies, see the book *Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law* by Joseph Kimble, Carolina Academic Press, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> If you would like to understand grammar better, there are good guides and courses available. See the extra resources in Appendix 4.

# About 26Ten

The name 26Ten refers to the 26 letters of the alphabet and the ten digits we use for counting. Being able to read, write and count – also known as literacy and numeracy – are critical tools for life.

Changes at work and in everyday life mean we all need stronger literacy and numeracy skills than ever before. At present, almost half our adult population needs support to do one or more everyday tasks like:

- filling in forms
- reading to their child
- sending and reading text messages
- following procedures at work
- adding up the cost of groceries in a shopping basket
- taking the correct dose of medicine.

Tasmania's 26Ten strategy brings people together – from businesses, communities, government organisations and interested individuals – to take practical action to lift literacy and numeracy levels across Tasmania.

## **The strategy has three simple goals:**

1. Everyone knows about adult literacy and numeracy.
2. Everyone is supported to improve their skills and to help others.
3. Everyone communicates clearly.

This guide supports the third goal – for everyone to communicate clearly.

# How clear communication supports all Tasmanians

Being able to understand information when you read or hear it is something we can all appreciate, whatever our literacy level.

If information that is important to us contains complicated language, or if it isn't presented in an easy-to-follow way, we can end up confused. This can mean missing out on opportunities we all should be able to access. It can also lead to mistakes and complaints that cause frustration and take time to sort out.

The plain English style of writing helps everyone understand information more easily. It improves our access to information, and the many benefits that flow from that.

This is why 26Ten is promoting plain English as the preferred style of public and professional communication in Tasmania. Along with this guide, 26Ten offers free plain English workshops and web resources to Tasmanians.

You can find out more at [26ten.tas.gov.au](http://26ten.tas.gov.au) and on the last page of this guide.





# What is plain English?

A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily:

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- use that information.



This widely accepted definition of plain English comes from the International Plain Language Federation.<sup>3</sup> (You'll notice that 'plain English' is also sometimes called 'plain language'.)

When you use plain English you:

- write clearly
- give relevant information in the right order
- help people find information easily.

## Plain English – before and after

To see the difference made by plain English, have a look at this 'before' and 'after' example.

Before 	After 
In our endeavour to ensure guest safety at all times, can visitors please note that fire alarm testing is carried out every Monday at 9.30 am.	We test the fire alarm every Monday at 9.30 am. <sup>4</sup>

Sometimes people think plain English 'dumbs down' complex information, but this isn't so. Plain English is about communicating to your reader or listeners in language they understand, whether they are specialists, colleagues or members of the public.

<sup>3</sup> Source: International Plain Language Federation, [iplfederation.org/plain-language](http://iplfederation.org/plain-language), accessed 25 November 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Based on Martin Cutts, Plain Language Commission UK.

Most people do not want to have to read content more than once to understand what it's about and decide what to do next. While complex language is sometimes necessary, most of the time plain English is more suitable.

## What are the benefits of plain English?

- Plain English saves time and money, and avoids misunderstandings. It increases the chances that everyone will understand your message, including adults who have difficulty reading.
- Plain English makes it easier for people to make informed judgements, including about their rights and responsibilities.
- Clearly presented information shows respect and consideration for your readers, which can help build better relationships.
- Work instructions written in plain English are easier for staff to understand and follow.
- The clarity plain English brings means people are more likely to use services. They will also feel more confident in the people providing services, which can mean fewer mistakes, complaints and unnecessary queries.

### Examples of the practical and financial benefits of plain English

New Zealand company AA Insurance wanted to make their policies easier for customers to read and understand. They rewrote ten of their policies and since then they've had fewer calls from confused customers. Their frontline staff also haven't had to call in technical support staff as often. Staff have found the revamped policies make it easier for them to explain policies to customers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A plain language insurance policy is a matter of trust', Write Ltd, New Zealand, [write.co.nz/resources/case-studies/aa-insurance-case-study](https://write.co.nz/resources/case-studies/aa-insurance-case-study), accessed 8 May 2023.

# Easy Read – another form of clear communication

‘Easy Read’ or ‘Easy English’ is a more simplified form of plain English. Valued by people with low literacy, people with particular disabilities, and where English is not their first language, it uses additional techniques such as:

- images and icons to support the text
- larger font sizes
- lots of white space on the page.

Easy Read content is designed with the understanding that someone else may read the information to the intended reader or listener.<sup>6</sup>

## Getting started with plain English

Remember that just because something is easy to read, it doesn’t mean it’s always easy to write. Writing in plain English takes time and practice to do well, especially when you’re starting out. Keep in mind that persistence pays off and the rewards are great – both for your intended readers and for you.

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Government Style Manual, Easy Read, [stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read](https://stylemanual.gov.au/content-types/easy-read), accessed 8 May 2023.

# Steps from start to finish

These five steps will help take you from staring at a blank page to having a well-informed reader.

**Step 1** Think about your reader and purpose

**Step 2** Organise your information

**Step 3** Write your content

**Step 4** Check what you have written

**Step 5** Design and produce your content

Under each step are tips to help you improve written and spoken information. They are guidelines, not rules, and not all of them will apply to every reader or every piece of content. But using even some of them will take you a long way towards making your information more understandable.



# Step 1: Think about your reader and purpose

## Know who you are writing for and why

No matter what type of content you're writing – from a short email to a long report – it's important to be clear about your answers to three questions:

1. Who are you writing this content for: who do you want to read or hear it?
2. Why are you writing it: what's its purpose?
3. What action do you want your readers to take: is there something you want them to do, think or feel?

## Keep your readers in mind as you write

Once you've answered the questions above, you might like to work through this next set of questions. They'll help you better understand your readers and what they might need as they read (or listen to) your content.

4. How will your readers read it – all the way through or by skimming and finding the sections that interest them?
5. How familiar are they with the words and terms you're likely to use?
6. What subjects can you assume they'll understand?
7. Do you need to explain any details they may not be familiar with?
8. Will they need any background information?
9. Is there more than one reader or group of readers, and, if so, do you need to write separate content for them?

Before you start writing your content, write an outline of what you want to include and in what order.

# Step 2: Organise your information

## Use plenty of signposts

### Table of contents

With long content, a table of contents helps people to find the information they are particularly interested in.

### Introductory paragraph

If a section is very long, it is a good idea to include an introductory paragraph that summarises the contents.

### Headings

Informative headings and subheadings help people find what they need more easily. They also make the text easier to read.

### Dot-point lists

Use dot points to break down complex text into lists. Aim to use no more than six in each list. This guide includes plenty of examples of dot points.

## Use clear paragraphs

Limit each paragraph to one idea or topic. Try to keep their length between two and five sentences. Leave some white space between each paragraph and avoid continuing a paragraph over a page.

## Keep content as short as possible

Long content can be hard work to read, whether in print or on screen. Make sure every sentence you've written needs to be there. Often as you edit your work, you'll see ways to tighten up the writing and present points more clearly. It's important to allow time for this. The tips on editing in Step 4 can help (see pages 16–18).

# Step 3: Write your content

## Be personal

Use ‘you’, ‘we’ and ‘I’ in your content. This will help you to imagine your readers and make the tone of your content warmer. It’s easier for readers to engage with information when you address them directly.

## Use everyday words

There’s nothing wrong with long words, but there’s no need to use them when short words will do. At the back of this guide, you’ll find suggestions for shorter words to replace long ones (see pages 29–32).

If you do need to use specialised language, make sure you explain what it means. Also watch out for buzzwords – words and phrases that become fashionable for a while then go out of fashion. Some examples are ‘let’s unpack this’ and ‘driving change’. If you find yourself using what might be a buzzword, pause and work out what you’re really trying to say.

## Keep sentences short

Long sentences can be hard work for your readers. While there are no strict rules about sentence length, try to keep them to an average of 15 words. Vary the length with a mix of shorter and longer ones, and try not to go over 25 words. Aim to have only one idea in each sentence. If you see that you have more than one idea in a sentence, try to break it up into two or more sentences.



## Use the active voice

When we talk about the active voice, we mean the way the action word – the verb – is used in a sentence. Most sentences have three main parts: a **subject**, a **verb** and an *object*.

The **subject** is who or what is doing the action. The **verb** is the action. The *object* is who or what the action is being done to. An example is: 'Jay wrote the report'. **Jay** is the subject, **wrote** is the verb, and the *report* is the object.

The opposite of the active voice is the passive voice. This is when the object comes first and the subject last. The sentence above written in the passive voice would be 'The report was written by Jay'.

The active voice is clearer and livelier and comes across as more personal and direct. You also usually need fewer words to say the same thing, as in these examples.

Before 	After 
Sentences in the <b>passive voice</b> are written in this order: <i>object</i> – <b>verb</b> – <b>subject</b> <b>For example:</b>	Sentences in the <b>active voice</b> are written in this order: <b>subject</b> – <b>verb</b> – <i>object</i> <b>For example:</b>
<i>It will be done</i> by <b>us</b> .	<b>We will do</b> <i>it</i> .
<i>The match was won</i> by <b>Tasmania</b> .	<b>Tasmania won</b> <i>the match</i> .
<i>A decision on your application will be made</i> by <b>the panel</b> .	<b>The panel will decide</b> on <i>your application</i> .
<i>The building plans were approved</i> by <b>the Council</b> .	<b>The Council approved</b> <i>the building plans</i> .

Most sentences will have other words as well, but the subject, verb and object are nearly always there.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There are some exceptions. If you're interested in this topic, you can find out more from grammar guides. See the extra resources section in Appendix 4.



## Know when to use the passive voice

The passive voice puts some distance between the person giving the information and the person receiving it. Sometimes it's appropriate to use it, such as when the active voice seems too harsh.



An example is: 'We will close your account if you do not pay us today'. This is active, but it may be the wrong tone to use. In this case, you might prefer to use the passive voice and write, 'This account will be closed if it is not paid today'.

The passive voice is also useful when you don't know who the subject of the sentence is, or they aren't important to the topic, or you don't want to focus on them.

Because sentences in the passive voice may not be as clear and direct as sentences in the active voice, you should use it only occasionally.

## Avoid using nouns made from verbs

Nouns made from verbs are technically known as 'nominalisations'. Avoid these and instead make actions direct and strong. Examples include 'consider' rather than 'consideration', 'establish' rather than 'establishment' and 'discuss' rather than 'discussion'.

Before 	After 
We gave consideration to four options.	We considered four options.
The retail company is working on the establishment of a new market.	The retail company is establishing a new market.
They will have a discussion about the new building tomorrow.	They will discuss the new building tomorrow.



## Remove unnecessary words and phrases

Watch out for wording that bogs down your message, such as:



- wordy phrases – using more words than you need to say something
- tautologies – two words that mean the same thing
- double negatives – two negative words where a single word will have the same effect
- noun strings or trains – groups of nouns joined together.

### Wordy phrases



Only use as many words as you need to get your message across clearly. Below are some examples, and you'll find more towards the end of this guide (see pages 29–32).

Before 	After 
in advance of	before
owing to the fact that	because
in the event that	if



### Tautologies

Before 	After 
new innovation	innovation

### Double negatives

Before 	After 
less unhealthy option	healthier option

### Noun strings

Before 	After 
<b>Laboratory animal rights protection regulations.</b>	Regulations to protect the rights of laboratory animals. <sup>8</sup>
The agency's new system will help in the achievement of <b>injury management outcome improvements.</b>	The agency's new system will help improve how it manages injuries. <sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/avoid-noun-strings/](https://plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/avoid-noun-strings/), accessed 8 May 2023.



<sup>9</sup> [stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/types-words/nouns#noun\\_trains\\_are\\_hard\\_to\\_understand](https://stylemanual.gov.au/grammar-punctuation-and-conventions/types-words/nouns#noun_trains_are_hard_to_understand), accessed 8 May 2023.

## Be consistent

Be consistent with any terms you use in your content. For example, if you call something a review, use this term throughout. It can confuse your readers if you use the words review, evaluation, audit and study to refer to the same thing.

## Be specific

Help your readers connect with something they know. Sometimes small details can give a better picture of what you are writing about. Again, keep your readers in mind and what knowledge of the subject they already have.

Before 	After 
A period of unfavourable conditions affected the farm's productivity.	Extended drought, falling wheat prices and rising water costs reduced the farm's productivity.

## Spell out abbreviations

Abbreviations are formed from the first letters of words. If you're using them in your content, spell them out the first time with the abbreviation in brackets. For example, CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), and TasCOSS (Tasmanian Council of Social Services).

Sometimes well-known organisations and businesses become better known by their abbreviated form. Examples include unidentified flying object (UFO), RACT (Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania) and United Kingdom (UK). Also avoid using abbreviations in titles and headings.

When deciding which form to use, think about your readers and what will make sense to them. If you are using a lot of abbreviations, it can be helpful to list their short and long forms in alphabetical order in a separate section.

## Use questions and answers

Questions and answers are a good way to get information across or emphasise certain facts. They also mean people can go straight to the area that particularly interests them. Having a list of frequently asked questions, or FAQs, is a common way to do this.

**An example of an FAQs list:**

**Q: What does FAQs mean?**

**A: It is the abbreviation for frequently asked questions.**

**Q: When might you use FAQs?**

**A: When you want to make information easy to find, when you want to emphasise certain facts, or when you already know questions your readers might have.**

**Q: How long should an FAQs list be?**

**A: There are no rules, but if the list of FAQs is longer than two pages, it can be hard for your readers to find the answers they are looking for.**



# Step 4: Check what you have written

## Edit carefully

When you've finished writing your content, think of it as a first draft. Your next step is to check the material to make sure that its purpose is clear and your intended readers will easily understand it.

This process is known as editing and there are three main types – substantive editing, copyediting and proofreading. They each have an important part to play, whether you've written a short email, a long report, or something in between. Below is a short summary of the three types, adapted from the Australian Government Style Manual.<sup>10</sup> If you'd like to know more about the manual, it's free online at [stylemanual.gov.au](https://stylemanual.gov.au).

### Substantive editing

Here you're looking at the overall structure and shape of the content.

- Is the information set out in a logical order your readers can easily follow?
- Is everything there that your readers need to know?
- If it includes information your readers don't need, can you cut that?
- Are the content and tone likely to engage your intended readers?

### Copyediting

Here you're looking at the sentences and words.

- Are your sentences as clear and straightforward as they can be?
- Have you used everyday words that your readers will be familiar with?
- Are all the words and phrases as concise as they can be?
- Have you used the same words and terms consistently?

### Proofreading

Here you're doing a final check for any errors.

- Are all the words, names, addresses, emails and websites spelt correctly?
- Are all the numbers, including phone numbers, correct?
- Is the layout alright? Are the page breaks in the right place?

When you're working on long pieces of content it's best to give yourself a break between writing and editing. That way you'll see the content with fresh eyes and be more likely to notice problems.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Government Style Manual, online edition, [stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/editing-and-proofreading](https://stylemanual.gov.au/writing-and-designing-content/editing-and-proofreading), accessed 8 May 2023.

## Test your content before you send or publish it

It can be worthwhile to test your content to see if people understand it easily. You might ask a colleague for feedback on how clear and readable an email is. Or you might find it valuable to test your content with some of your intended readers.

Testing saves you time and money. You'll be less likely to have content that confuses your readers and causes them to ask you more questions. And with print material, you'll be less likely to have to publish corrections later.

## Use readability tools as a guide only

Readability tools are software (or apps) that you can use to give an idea of how difficult a piece of writing is to read. They measure syllables per word, words per sentence and sentences per paragraph, then work out the average and provide a rating. Treat them as broad guides only. They're not able to consider your readers' needs and whether your content helps your readers find information easily. People are the best judge of any content.



## Use a house style guide

Most organisations have terms and phrases that they use often. It is useful to have a house style guide where these are listed, so that everyone can easily check them. The guide can also include any useful writing or layout standards.

### Examples of what you can include in a house style guide

#### Your organisation's name

- How do you spell it?
- Do you use terms like 'Incorporated' or 'Pty Ltd'?

#### Job titles

- Do you use capital letters?
- Are they up to date?

#### Abbreviations

- When do you use the abbreviated form for your organisation, for example, RACT for Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania?
- What other abbreviations do you use?

#### Jargon

- What jargon will everyone you're writing for understand?
- What standard explanations will help those people who are unlikely to understand the jargon?

A simple way to set up a house style guide is to have a one-page list of commonly confused words in alphabetical order. In it you can list your preferred form of any words that can be spelled, capitalised or hyphenated differently, such as ageing or aging, state government or State Government, and part-time or part time.

# Step 5: Design and produce your content

## Choose a readable font

These days many different fonts – also known as typefaces – are available. Fonts are generally grouped as ‘serif’ or ‘sans serif’.

**Serif** fonts have a small projection at the end of each stroke in a letter. This example is Times New Roman font.

**Word**

**Sans serif** fonts don’t have this projection. (‘Sans’ is French for ‘without’.) This example is Arial font.

**Word**

While there are no rules for which fonts to use, there are widely accepted practices. In the past, there were different practices for print and screen-based content. Now, as more and more people read material on screens, the main factors influencing your choice are the simplicity of the font and how familiar your intended readers are likely to be with it.<sup>11</sup>

When selecting a font for content that will be read online, it’s a good idea to check whether it is available on both Windows and Mac computers. If you’re not sure which fonts to use, experiment with these common ones – Times New Roman and Georgia (serif font) and Arial and Verdana (sans serif font).

Avoid using more than two different fonts, as this can be distracting for your readers.

## Make the font large enough

For best results, use at least 12-point text.

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<sup>11</sup> [webaim.org/techniques/fonts](http://webaim.org/techniques/fonts), accessed 8 May 2023.

## **Make important points stand out clearly**

When you want to emphasise some text – for example headings or a word or sentence – use a bigger size font, or put it in bold or a different colour.

Don't use all capital letters (also called upper case) to make points stand out. AS YOU CAN SEE FROM THIS EXAMPLE, THEY CAN BE DIFFICULT TO READ AND MAKE IT SEEM THAT YOU ARE SHOUTING AT YOUR READER!

Also avoid underlining text as it makes it harder to read.

## **Use left aligned text**

Left aligned text is where the content is lined up with the left margin of the page (like the text on this page). It is also known as ragged right text. This is the easiest to read for most content.

Justified text is where the text is distributed evenly between the margins. Avoid justified text because it can lead to large gaps between words, which makes sentences difficult to read.

### **Justified text**

Try not to justify text, as this can lead to large gaps between words. It is best to use left aligned text. Also, be generous with your margins.

### **Left aligned (or ragged right)**

Try not to justify text, as this can lead to large gaps between words. It is best to use left aligned text. Also, be generous with your margins.

## **Use images with care**

Images, graphs and tables can complement written information and provide a break from large amounts of text. When you use them thoughtfully, they can be a great way to emphasise important facts and figures. Place them near the relevant text and make sure they genuinely help explain it. Keep your readers in mind though as some people are not familiar with graphs like pie charts and bar charts, and may not understand how they work.

## Watch your line spacing

Line spacing refers to the amount of space from the bottom of one line of text to the bottom of the next line. Too little space and the readers will miss lines. Too much and the readers may be unsure if the lines of text refer to each other. You can adjust the line spacing in a Word document through the paragraph settings. The numbers in brackets in the examples below show the different line spacing used.

### Too little (1.0 or single)

A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

### Suitable (1.15 spacing)

A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

### Also suitable (1.5 spacing)

A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

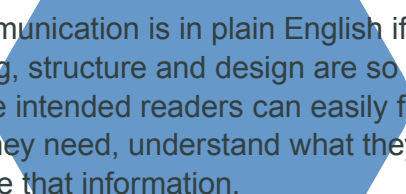
### Too much (2.0 spacing)

A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.



## Avoid background images

Avoid using background images behind text. Many organisations use illustrations as a background image. This makes text harder to read, especially if the background image is colourful.



A communication is in plain English if its wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.

Avoid 

## Use good quality paper

Many types of paper are used for printing and each one reacts differently to ink. The best quality paper is 'uncoated'. Because of its surface, it takes ink well, which improves readability.

The other benefit of uncoated paper is that it does not reflect light. Content printed on uncoated paper is easier to read because there's no glare from the page.

## Avoid shadowing on print formats

When printing your content, make sure your paper is thick enough to stop images or text on one side of a page being seen through the paper. This is known as 'shadowing' and makes reading difficult. Some paper is more transparent than others and you may find you need a heavier weight of paper. If you're working with a graphic designer, they can advise you. Your paper supplier can also guide you.

## Choose a good contrast

Whether writing for print or screen, for best results make sure there is a strong contrast between the text and the background.

When you use light coloured text on a dark background, use a bold font. This helps prevent the problem of ink filling in the parts of the letter. See for example the 'Th' image.



## Use colour and shading with care

Graphics and photographs that have big blocks of colour and shading use a lot of download and storage space. They also use up a lot of ink if printing. If you know your readers are likely to have a basic computer and printer, come up with a design that makes it affordable and easy for them to download and print.

# Spreading the word



For many of us, making the shift to plain English means changing attitudes and old habits. It takes time and persistence, but the benefits are clear.

If you would like to see plain English being used in businesses, organisations and communities across Tasmania, add your voice to the growing number of people supporting this shift. Spread the word about plain English to family, friends and colleagues. Learn more about it through courses and books. Set up a practice group with others who are interested. If you receive confusing information from businesses or organisations, get in touch with them and suggest they rewrite it in plain English.

If you have a print copy of this guide, use it until it's worn out and falls apart, then get a new one. Pass on copies to everyone you know. Encourage young people around you to read it and use it – they'll be the ones making a difference for Tasmania in a decade or two. Finally, think about becoming a member of the 26Ten network and joining forces with the wonderful people and organisations already involved (see contact details at the back of this guide).

We can all help to make Tasmania a place where written and spoken information is easy to understand and act on – not just for a few, but for us all.

## 26Ten

# Appendices

In this section you'll find some useful tools and information.

- Appendix 1 has a handy summary of all the tips and techniques in the guide.
- Appendix 2 has a checklist you can use to quickly assess what you've written and see if it is written clearly.
- Appendix 3 has four pages of examples of alternatives for common complicated words and phrases.
- Appendix 4 has a list of useful resources.



# Appendix 1

## A handy summary

The following points are a condensed version of all the information in this guide.

### **Think of the person reading your information**

Make it clear who you are writing to or about by using 'I', 'we' and 'you' where you can.

### **Have an average of 15 words in each sentence**

Keep your sentences as short as possible. Vary their length by mixing longer sentences with shorter, snappier ones. Aim to have no more than 25 words in any one sentence.

### **Be direct and use the active voice most of the time**

Put the person, group or thing doing the action at the start of the sentence as much as possible. For example, 'We will decide on your application soon' instead of 'A decision on your application will be made soon'.

### **Avoid unnecessary jargon**

Aim to replace specialist terms with their plainer alternatives. If you can't do this, define the terms plainly.

### **Avoid using nouns made from verbs**

Make actions direct. For example, use 'consider' instead of 'consideration', 'establish' instead of 'establishment' and 'discuss' instead of 'discussion'.

### **Remove unnecessary words and phrases**

Only use as many words as you need to get your message across clearly. For example, use 'before' instead of 'in advance of' and 'if' instead of 'in the event that'.

### **Be consistent with terms**

To avoid confusing your readers, use the same term for the same concept or thing throughout your content. For example, if you call something a standard, avoid later calling it a benchmark, a guideline or a norm.

## **Be specific with descriptions**

Help your readers connect with something they know, rather than using general terms or ideas.

## **Define abbreviations your readers aren't familiar with**

As with specialist terms, try to keep abbreviations to a minimum. If you think your readers might not be familiar with them, spell them out.

## **Avoid expressions that aren't in English**

People sometimes confuse e.g., i.e. and etc. Try to use the full English equivalents – 'for example', 'that is' and 'and so on' – or try rewriting your sentence.

## **Check your work before you send it out**

Make sure you edit your content carefully before sending it out. Sometimes it's a good idea to test it first, either with a colleague or one of your intended readers.

## **Use a clear, readable font**

Use a clear font that will work well for your readers. Times New Roman is a common serif font and Arial a common sans serif font. Aim for at least 12 point as standard size. Try not to have more than two distinct fonts in your content.

## **Break up dense text**

Use informative headings and subheadings, dot-point lists, and question and answer formats to help your readers find their way through your content.

## **Emphasise text carefully**

Only use bigger size font, bold or colour to emphasise text. Keep capital letters to a minimum to avoid SHOUTING AT YOUR READER! Avoid underlining and putting phrases in italics, as these types of formatting tend to make text harder to read.

## **Use left aligned text**

Align your text to the left to avoid large gaps between words, which can happen when text is justified.

## **Use space to help your text stand out**

Use 1.15 or 1.5 line spacing so the eye can move easily from one line to the next.

## **Use colour and images appropriately**

If you use colour, make sure that it's easy on the eye and has a clear purpose. If using images, tables and charts, make sure they genuinely help explain the text. Avoid busy background images, which make text difficult to read.

## **Think about the final product for your readers**

For published content, use good quality paper. For electronic content, avoid using graphics and photographs with big blocks of colour and shading where possible. These use a lot of space when downloading and storing, and a lot of ink when printing.



# Appendix 2

## Checklist for content

This checklist offers a quick way to review your content to see if it is in plain English. Not all questions will apply to every type of content, but try to answer ‘yes’ as much as possible to the ones that do.

### Step 1: Think about your reader and purpose

1. Is the purpose of the content clear to the writer and the reader?
2. Is the tone suitable for both the purpose and the reader?
3. Is the reader likely to be able to understand it on the first read?

### Step 2: Organise your information

4. Is information organised logically, with the most important points first?
5. Are paragraphs short – two to five sentences?
6. Does each paragraph have just one topic?
7. Have informative headings been used to break up long text?
8. Have dot-point or numbered lists been used for detailed information?

### Step 3: Write your content

9. Are personal pronouns like ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘we’ used where possible?
10. Are sentences short – an average of 15 words and no more than 25?
11. Does each sentence have just one idea?
12. Are sentences active voice, except where passive voice is necessary?
13. Are the words precise, and familiar to the reader?
14. Have unnecessary words been taken out?

### Step 4: Check what you have written

15. Is the spelling, grammar and punctuation all correct?
16. Is everything the reader needs to know there, and no more?

### Step 5: Design and produce your content

17. Is the layout easy to scan and read?
18. Is the font easy to read and large enough for the intended reader?
19. Is the line spacing ideal for reading – spacing of 1.15 or 1.5?

# Appendix 3

## Words and phrases to use

Try to use everyday words and concise words as much as possible. In this part of the guide, you'll find some alternatives to complicated words and phrases.

Everyday words	
Instead of	Consider
accompany	join, go with
alternatively	or
ascertain	find out
audit	review, check
avail of	take up, take
benchmark	standard
beneficial	helpful, useful
biannually	twice a year
biennially	every two years
calculate	work out
cease	end, finish
commence	start, begin
confiscate	take from
consequently	so
constitute	make up, form
demonstrate	show
determine	check, work out
disseminate	share, spread

Everyday words	
Instead of	Consider
endeavour	try
eventuality	situation
facilitate	make easier, help, enable
fundamental	basic
herewith	with
in lieu of	instead of
incremental	gradual, little by little
inter alia	among other things
interim	temporary, meantime, for now
irrespective	regardless
locality	place
modification	change, alteration
operational	working
optimum	best, greatest, most
participate	take part
particulars	details
persons	people
quarterly	every three months
is resident, residing	living
terminate	end, finish
utilise	use

<b>Concise words</b>	
<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Consider</b>
adequate number of	enough
adjacent to	beside, next to
as a result of, due to the fact that	because
at the present time	now, currently
by means of	by, with
come to the conclusion	conclude
draw to your attention	point out, show
during the course of	while
excessive number of	too many
for the duration of	during, until the end
for the purpose of	to
give an indication	indicate, signal
give consideration to	consider, think about
hold discussions, hold meetings	discuss, meet
in conjunction with	with
in possession of	have, own
in proximity to	near, close to
in receipt of	receiving, getting
in reference to	about
in respect of	about, for
in the absence of	without
in the course of	during, while
in the event that	if
in view of the fact that	since, because
it would appear that	apparently
large proportion of	many

<b>Concise words</b>	
<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Consider</b>
make an application	apply
not in a position to	unable to
not later than	by, on or before
notwithstanding the fact that	despite, even if, however
on a daily basis	daily, every day
on behalf of	by, for
on condition that	if
on the part of	by
provided that	if, as long as
subsequent to	after
sufficient number of	enough
take exception to	disagree with, object to
under the provisions of	under
until such time that	until
with regard to	about

# Appendix 4

## Extra resources

### Online

#### **Australian Government Style Manual**

[stylemanual.gov.au](http://stylemanual.gov.au)

Intended for people who write the government's digital content, the style manual is also an extensive and authoritative resource for everyone who writes for the Australian public.

It aims to put people's needs at the centre of any content that is created for them and covers different topics under six broad areas. Some are listed here:

- Accessible and inclusive content – covers the diversity among the Australian population, with principles of inclusive language and design.
- Writing and designing content – includes writing in plain language, guidelines for editing and proofreading, and designing 'findable' content.
- Grammar, punctuation and conventions – covers punctuation conventions, grammar and sentence structure, spelling and capitalisation, shortened forms, expressing numbers and measurement, and official titles and forms of address.
- Content types – covers different formats such as emails, letters, forms, PDFs, social media, video, audio and images.
- Structuring content – covers the use of headings, links, lists, tables and text boxes, and writing effective paragraphs.
- Referencing and attribution – details the referencing styles used in government publications, including how to cite legislation.

#### **Plain Language Association International**

[plainlanguagenetwork.org](http://plainlanguagenetwork.org)

An association for plain language supporters and practitioners around the world. Membership covers over 30 countries and 15 languages.



### **NALA Plain English Service**

[nala.ie/plain-english](http://nala.ie/plain-english)

Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency offers plain English services. The website contains plain English tips and resources.

### **Macquarie Dictionary**

[macquariedictionary.com.au](http://macquariedictionary.com.au)

The Macquarie is tailored to Australian usage. It is available by subscription, and offers a free trial. The free part of the website has language resources such as grammar and punctuation guides, and lists such as Australian awards and honours, vocabulary used in different regions, and collective nouns for various animals.

### **Oxford Practice Grammar**

[elt.oup.com/student/practicegrammar/?cc=global&selLanguage=en](http://elt.oup.com/student/practicegrammar/?cc=global&selLanguage=en)

Practice tests and downloadable test papers with the answers provided. Intended for students of English at basic, intermediate and advanced levels.

### **Department of Health Tasmania**

[health.tas.gov.au/publichealth/health\\_literacy](http://health.tas.gov.au/publichealth/health_literacy)

Resources to help improve 'health literacy' in Tasmania. The Workplace Toolkit and the various Resources sections contain material on adult literacy, and techniques for using plain English and easy English in spoken and written communication.

### **26Ten workshops and resources**

[26ten.tas.gov.au](http://26ten.tas.gov.au)

On the 26Ten website you'll find downloadable copies of this guide, training videos, information about free plain English workshops, and more.

## **Print**

*Oxford Guide to Plain English* by Martin Cutts, 5th edition, Oxford University Press, 2020.

*Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law* by Joseph Kimble, Carolina Academic Press, 2012.

*Macquarie Dictionary* (choose the most recent edition).







# More about 26Ten

26Ten is a long-term strategy to lift adult literacy and numeracy skills in our state. We bring together businesses, communities, government organisations and individuals to give adults practical support where and when they need it. More than 1,000 organisations and individuals are working with us, and more are joining as they recognise that building these skills benefits all Tasmanians.

## What we offer

- 26Ten Communities: Local literacy for work and life, to give communities longer-term funding to implement adult literacy programs that suit the needs of people in their region.
- The 26Ten Chat, a practical five-step guide to help people start a conversation with those who have difficulty with reading, writing or maths. It sets out respectful ways to encourage people to find support.
- The 26Ten workplace grants program that funds employers to improve the literacy skills of Tasmanians at work.
- Free literacy awareness workshops to raise awareness and promote action.
- Free plain English workshops to encourage a commitment to clearer communication.
- The 1300 00 2610 helpline to guide and refer Tasmanians seeking help.
- A collection of stories showing how communities, organisations and individuals are making a difference and inspiring others to act.

You can find more about 26Ten, what we offer, and how you can help improve adult literacy and numeracy in Tasmania from our website at [26ten.tas.gov.au](http://26ten.tas.gov.au).

## Contact

**Helpline** 1300 00 2610  
**Email** [email@26ten.tas.gov.au](mailto:email@26ten.tas.gov.au)  
**Website** [www.26ten.tas.gov.au](http://www.26ten.tas.gov.au)

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