

A 26TEN Plain English Webinar

How to write clearer emails

Handouts



1. First things first

1. Why are you writing this email?
2. What response or action do you want?
3. Who is your reader? Is there more than one?
4. What do you know about your reader?
For example, how busy are they? How familiar are they with the topic? How much do they care about the topic? What's in it for them?

2. Use the M.A.D.E. structure

Message	Most important point
Action	What you want the reader to do
Details	Information the reader needs to know
Extras	Information the reader might like to know

Here's an example of a simple email done the M.A.D.E. way.

To: All team members
From: Demita Narjan
Subject: Farewell party for Sasha – date and catering details
Date: 20 May 2021

<Salutation or greeting>

MESSAGE Please join us for afternoon tea to farewell Sasha who is moving to a new job.

ACTION When: 1 July 2021 at 3 pm
Where: Main meeting room
We will have light refreshments.

Please RSVP by email and let me know any food requests by 20 June 2021.

DETAILS Food Lore Café is catering. They offer a wide range of food. See their website for details www.foodlore.com.au.

EXTRAS The meeting room is booked by the IT department at 4.30 pm, so we will need to finish up by then.

Kind regards

Demita Narjan
Administrative Assistant

Here's an example of a more complex email done the M.A.D.E. way.¹

To: All team members
From: Nic Croxton, Team Leader, Customer Relationships
Subject: Compelling new evidence on why plain English is important
Date: 20 April 2021

<Salutation or greeting>

MESSAGE More than 80 per cent of the general public find government information difficult to understand. This statistic might surprise you as much as it surprised me.

ACTION **From 1 July 2021, plain English is to become the standard writing style in our team.**

DETAILS Many of you already write well. What we're after is a consistently high standard across the whole team. As a first step towards this, you'll all have the chance to attend a short information session on adult literacy, followed by a half-day workshop on plain English. That will give us all a common understanding of our new approach.

EXTRAS **What the statistics tell us about adult literacy and plain English**
The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts regular surveys of literacy. It ranks the population on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The minimum level needed for coping with standard documents and forms is 3.

- 46% are at level 1 or 2
- 37% are at level 3
- 17% are at levels 4 and 5

Writing all our documents in plain English will make it easier for people at levels 2 and 3 to understand them. For people at level 1, an approach called Easy English can work well.

I'll be in touch again soon with dates for the training. I look forward to working with you all on this.

<Sign off and signature block>

¹ Adapted from presentation by Peter Davies, strategic communication adviser, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, viewed 3 May 2019. These are Victorian figures. Tasmania's are similar. <https://editorsvictoria.org/publications/newsletter/185-may-2019>

Here's an example of an email not done the M.A.D.E. way.²

To: Parents
From: Jo Grey
Subject: Update
Date: 6 May 2021

Dear Parents

We have established a special phone communication system to provide additional opportunities for parent input. During this year we will give added emphasis to the goal of communication and utilise a variety of means to accomplish this goal. Your inputs, from the unique position as a parent, will help us to plan and implement an educational plan that meets the needs of your child. An open dialogue, feedback and sharing of information between parents and teachers will enable us to work with your child in the most effective manner.

Kind regards
Jo Grey
Principal, Turner High School

- What's the most important point the Principal is trying to make?
- What action does the Principal want readers to take?
- Are there any other details they need to know?
- Is there anything else they might like to know?

If you're not sure, go back to the very first step: Why are you writing this email? What response or action do you want from your reader? Who is your reader and what questions will they have?

² Sample adapted from *On writing well*, Seventh edition, by William Zinsser, HarperCollins, 2006, p 169.

3. Get the tone right

Tone refers to the feel or mood of a piece of writing. Is your email cold and distant? Or is it warm and inviting? Does it sound 'shouty' or is it easy-listening?

Ways to adjust the tone of your email³

	More cold and distant	More warm and inviting
Words	Jargon, technical terms No contractions e.g. <i>it is</i> or <i>they will</i>	Familiar words Contractions e.g. <i>it's</i> or <i>they'll</i>
Viewpoint	Nouns for key people e.g. <i>The manager</i> or <i>the department</i> or <i>the customer</i>	Pronouns e.g. <i>I</i> or <i>we</i> or <i>you</i>
Grammar	Clunky sentences Spelling errors, typos	Smooth sentences Free of errors

You can also choose how formal you want to make your email.

Tone	Example
Informal	Why don't you come in early and grab a seat before things get started?
Standard	Please arrive 15 minutes before the concert starts.
Formal	Guests should be seated 15 minutes before the performance starts.

³ Australian Government Style Manual <https://www.stylemanual.gov.au/format-writing-and-structure/clear-language-and-writing-style/voice-and-tone>. Accessed 12 April 2021

What about your salutation and sign-off?

	More formal	More informal
Salutation or greeting	Dear Good morning	Hello Hi
Sign-off	Kind regards Yours sincerely Best wishes	Cheers Bye for now

4. Practise M.A.D.E. and Tone

Use the M.A.D.E. structure to write an email you need to work on. Include a clear subject heading. Also experiment with adjusting the tone through deliberately choosing specific words, using personal pronouns rather than nouns, and making sure your sentences are grammatically correct and you have no errors. Also experiment with the three different types of formality – informal, standard, formal – and work out which is most suitable.

<Salutation or greeting>

MESSAGE

ACTION

DETAILS

EXTRAS

<Sign-off>

5. Improve your plain English skills

Communicate Clearly: 26TEN's plain English workshops

- Half-day sessions
- Presented by trainers who are also plain English writers and editors
- Practical and interactive
- Free
- Can be tailored to your workplaces and documents

26ten.tas.gov.au/Pages/Workshops

What the workshops cover

- 5-step process for writing
- Being more clear and concise
- Organising material into a logical flow
- Keeping sentences short
- Using everyday words
- And much more...

For more information, contact 26TEN

Email – email@26ten.tas.gov.au

Phone – 1300 00 2610

Online – www.26ten.tas.gov.au