# An introduction to Plain English writing - workbook

Last revised 30 June 2017



## About the program

This training program is an action from the Tasmanian Disability Sector Language, Literacy and Numeracy Skills Action Plan 2016 - 2017.

The aim is to introduce support workers and team leaders to writing in Plain English.

This workshop is based on “Communicate clearly: A guide to Plain English” second edition, produced by 26TEN. The full document is available from the following URL: <https://26ten.tas.gov.au/communicate-clearly/Pages/About-this-guide.aspx>.

This program is adapted from the full training program to allow an overview of Plain English to be presented during a one-hour, team-based training session.

## Session objectives

At the end of this session you will be able to:

* Understand what is meant by Plain English
* Recognise the benefits of using Plain English
* Understand the steps to follow when writing Plain English

## Plain English definition

Plain English is a way of presenting information that helps someone to understand it the first time they read or hear it. It allows them to get to the information they need, understand it easily and act if they need to.

When you use plain English you:

* Write in clear language
* Give relevant information in the right order
* Help people find information quickly

## What does Plain English writing look like?

Read the following examples, and discuss which is most useful for Jack. Which do you think is written in Plain English?

### Email 1

From: pam@supersupportservice.org.au

To: jack@supersupportservice.org.au

Subject: Our van is being serviced

Hello Jack,

One of our vans is being serviced this week so can you get a taxi and go and get it when you are on shift?

Thanks

Pamela

### Email 2

From: pam@supersupportservice.org.au

To: jack@supersupportservice.org.au

Subject: Requirement for vehicle collection from service and repair centre

Dear Jack,

Doubtless you are aware that Super Support Service has procured a Toyota van as a necessity of our contract with DHHS to transport residents between venues of their need. In keeping with our Workplace Health and Safety policy, the vehicle must be serviced every 6 months or after each 15,000 km and as such, it is now time for the vehicle to be serviced by the service and repair centre associated with the distributor, namely Hickman Motors. The servicing arrangements have been arranged by the fleet manager, Stephen Roderick and will involve a full service including oil change.

As you are working in the morning at the supported accommodation facility at 15 Birdsville St, you are being directed to collect the vehicle at the commencement of your shift at this time. You may catch a taxi cab to the service and repair centre using a voucher that is available in the office at the same address, namely 15 Birdsville St. The address of Hickman Motors can be found using a relatively simple search of the internet or through utilisation of the Yellow Pages directory.

Yours Sincerely,

Pamela

### Email 3

From: pam@supersupportservice.org.au

To: jack@supersupportservice.org.au

Subject: Service completed - Toyota van Registration AB55

Hello Jack,

The Toyota van has been serviced this week. It is ready for collection from Hickman Motors.

Please collect the van at the start of your shift on Thursday afternoon.

You will need to catch a taxi. There is a taxi voucher in the office at 15 Birdsville Street.

Hickman Motors’ address is 12 Jet Road, Moonah.

Thanks
Pamela

## Why use Plain English?

* The reader understands what you’ve written
* Avoid confusion
* Save time and therefore money
* Use language appropriate for the reader’s reading skills
* Minimise mistakes, complaints, or unnecessary queries
* Empower others to understand and follow instructions
* Enable others to make better informed decisions
* Decrease writing time and cut reading time
* Can you think of any other reasons?

## There are 5 steps to writing in Plain English

1. Think about your reader
2. Organise your information
3. Write your content
4. Check what you have written
5. Design and produce your document

### Step 1 - Think about your reader

#### Know who you are writing for and why.

* Who are you writing for?
* Why are you writing it?
* What action do you want them to take (to do, to think or feel)?
* Is there more than one reader or group of readers? Do they need separate documents?

#### Who do you write emails to?

I write emails to:

#### Why do you write emails?

The reasons I write emails are:

#### Write for your reader:

* Are they familiar with the words and terms you will use?
* Will you need to explain details they are not familiar with?
* Will they need any background information?
* What information can you assume they understand?
* Will they read the whole document? Will they skip through to the sections that interest them?

### Step 2 - Organise your information

#### Use plenty of signposts

* Headings and sub-headings help people to work their way around a page. They also make the text less intimidating.
* Use bullet-point lists to break down complex text into lists.

#### Use clear paragraphs

* Limit each paragraph to one idea or topic.
* Keep paragraph length to two to five sentences.
* Leave some white space between each paragraph.

#### Keep documents as short as possible

* Make sure every sentence you write needs to be there.

#### Practice organising your document

Can structure Pam’s email message, so it’s clearer. For this activity, you can work with a partner. Decide on a useful heading (the subject) for the email. Then suggest some subheadings to structure the message. Write your structure on the next page.

From: pam@supersupportservice.org.au

To: team@supersupportservice.org.au

Subject: It’s Christmas time

Hello Team

Yay, summer is almost here. I am really looking forward to having a break and going to the Gold Coast this year. Before I get too carried away, we need to organise all our Christmas things. Did someone mention that there is going to be carols in the Hampton Street Park? Do we want to do a Kris Kringle again this year? $10 or $15? It would be great if we could all go to the carols. I reckon most residents will want to go. Let me know if you want to take holidays over the Christmas shutdown and what day you can come back in January. I think the Carols are on December the 23rd, and starts at 7.30.

What sort of food do you all want for our team Christmas get together? Coke, cheese and crackers, Cheezels ??? Can anyone not come if it’s on Dec 15th?

Cheers

Pam

### Step 3 - Write your content

#### Be personal

* Use ‘you’, ‘we’ and ‘I’ in your documents

#### Use everyday words

* Do not use long words when short words will do
* Explain technical terms if you need to use them

#### Keep sentences short

Use the active voice instead of the passive voice. This is clearer and generally shorter.

| **Active voice** | **Passive voice** |
| --- | --- |
| I will call you tomorrow. | You will be called tomorrow. |
| The coordinator approved the community access program. | The community access program was approved by the coordinator. |

#### Be consistent

* Use the same terms throughout your document

#### Be specific

* Details can give a better picture of what you are writing about

#### Spell out acronyms the first time you use them

* For example, Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE)

#### Ask specific questions if you need answers

#### Practice writing content

Use the blank lines below to draft an email for the staff at the house to pass on the following information. You will also need to ask them to respond.

The maintenance supervisor called, and has organised the electrician to repair the washing machine. Someone needs to be at the house between 9 am and 1 pm tomorrow.

From: teamleader@myservice.org.au

To: team@myservice.org.au

Subject:

### Step 4 - Check what you have written

Take your time to edit and proof read your document.

#### Edit the structure

* Is the information in a logical order the reader can follow easily?
* Is everything the reader needs included?
* Is there any information your reader doesn’t need? Can you cut it out?

#### Edit the message

* Check that sentences are clear and direct
* Check that you have used everyday words that your reader is familiar with
* Check that sentences are short
* Check that you have used consistent spelling and terminology
* Check that the information is accurate

#### Proof read the document

It can be a really good idea to get someone else to read your document for you. At first it can be difficult getting feedback. You get used to it though.

* Are all words, especially names, spelt correctly?
* Are all the numbers, including phone numbers, correct?
* Are full stops and capital letters used correctly?

#### Practice editing and proof reading

Edit the draft email you wrote on the previous page. There’s a spare page at the back of this booklet if you’d like to re-write it.

When you’re done, swap with someone else and proofread each other’s documents.

### Step 5 - Design and produce your document

Using these features will make your document easy to read. This increases accessibility.

* Use a clear, readable font, such as, Arial, font size 12
* Use subheadings and dot points
* Make important points stand out, use bold, size or a different colour
* Use 1.15 or 1.5 line spacing

## Other documents where you can use Plain English

* Incident reports
* Planning
* Workplace procedures (use numbers for actions/steps)
* Can you think of any other documents you write?

## Everyday words

| **Instead of** | **Consider** |
| --- | --- |
| accompany | join, go with |
| alternatively | or |
| ascertain | find out |
| beneficial | helpful |
| calculate | work out |
| determine | check, work out |
| endeavour | try |
| facilitate | help, enable |
| fundamental | basic |
| participate | take part |
| utilise | use |
| terminate | end, finish |

## Concise words

| **Instead of** | **Consider** |
| --- | --- |
| adequate number of | enough |
| adjacent to | beside, next to |
| draw your attention to | point out, show |
| for the duration of  | during, until the end |
| for the purpose of | to |
| in respect of | about, for |
| in the event of | if |
| make an application | apply |
| on the condition that | if |
| with regard to | about |

## More information

[Communicating in Plain English](https://www.nds.org.au/the-workplace-literacy-project/communicating-in-plain-english)

## Practice writing

Follow the 5 steps to write a Plain English document using the blank lines below.

It was your turn to do the shopping run today, but you ran out of time. You have written a list for someone else to do it tomorrow. The list includes toiletries for 2 residents, food for the BBQ on Saturday, and the Webster Pacs need to be collected.

Use your imagination to add a few details to the above to make sure the correct items are purchased.

From: teamleader@myservice.org.au

To: team@myservice.org.au

Subject: