

Keep your sentences short

Most experts would agree that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

This does not mean making every sentence the same length. Be punchy. Vary your writing by mixing short sentences (like the last one) with longer ones (like this one).

Follow the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence, plus perhaps one other related point. You should soon be able to keep to the average sentence length - used by top journalists and authors - quite easily.

However, at first you may still find yourself writing the odd long sentence, especially when trying to explain a complicated point. But most long sentences can be broken up in some way.

Prefer active verbs

With an active verb, the three parts appear in a particular order -subject then verb then object. For example:

Peter (subject) watched (verb) the television (object). Good uses of passives

There are times of course when it might be appropriate to use a passive.

- ✓ To make something less hostile - 'this bill has not been paid' (passive) is softer than 'you have not paid this bill' (active).
- ✓ To avoid taking the blame - 'a mistake was made' (passive) rather than 'we made a mistake' (active).
- ✓ When you don't know who or what the doer is - 'the England team has been picked'.
- ✓ If it simply sounds better.

But aim to make about 80 to 90% of your verbs active. Use 'you' and 'we'

Try to call the reader 'you*', even if the reader is only one of many people you are talking about generally. If this feels wrong at first, remember that you wouldn't use words like 'the applicant' and 'the supplier' if you were speaking to somebody sitting across a desk from you.

Use words that are appropriate for the reader

When you are talking to your reader, say exactly what you mean, using the simplest words that fit. This does not necessarily mean only using simple words - just words that the reader will understand.

Avoid nominalizations

A nominalization is a type of abstract noun. (Is that plain English?) In other words, it is the name of something that isn't a physical object, such as a process, technique or emotion.

Nominalizations are formed from verbs. For example:

Verb Nominalization

complete completion introduce introduction provide provision fail failure arrange arrangement
investigate investigation So what's wrong with them?

The problem is that often they are used instead of the verbs they come from. And because they are merely the names of things, they sound as if nothing is actually happening in the sentence. Like passive verbs, too many of them make writing very dull and heavy-going.

Here are some examples.

We had a discussion about the matter.

- ✓ We discussed the matter.
- ✓ There will be a stoppage of trains by drivers.
- ✓ Drivers will stop the trains.
- ✓ The implementation of the method has been done by a team.
- ✓ A team has implemented the method. Use lists where appropriate
- ✓ Lists are excellent for splitting information up. There are two main types of list.
- ✓ A list that is a continuous sentence with several listed points picked out at the beginning, middle or end.
- ✓ A list of separate points with an introductory statement (like this list).

In the list above, each point is a complete sentence so they each start with a capital letter and end with a full stop.

With a list that is part of a continuous sentence, put semicolons (;) after each point and start each with a lower-case letter.

If you can prove that:

- ✓ you were somewhere else at the time;
- ✓ you were not related to Mary; and
- ✓ you are over 21; you should be all right

As you can see, the next to last point has 'and' after the semicolon. If you only had to prove one of the three points instead of all of them, this word would be 'or'.

Make sure each point follows logically and grammatically from the introduction. For example, if you took out 'you' from the second and third points it would still flow as a normal sentence but not as a list. The introductory line and the third point would then read, 'If you can prove that are over 21', which obviously does not make sense.

For a list of short points, it is better to set it out in one of the following ways.

Kevin needed to take the following.

- ✓ A penknife
- ✓ Some string
- ✓ A pad of paper
- ✓ A pen

Kevin needed to take:

- ✓ a penknife
- ✓ some string
- ✓ a pad of paper; and
- ✓ a pen.

You should use bullet points in lists. These are better than numbers or letters as they draw your attention to each point without giving you extra information to take in. Apologising

If you are replying to a tricky letter or a complaint, or are dealing with a difficult problem, put yourself in the reader's shoes. Be professional, not emotional. You may have to give a firm, unwelcome answer, but be as helpful and polite as possible. If you are going to apologise, do so early. If the problem is your

fault, say so. Apologise completely and concisely, sympathetically and sincerely. And whether it is your fault or not, try to emphasise what you can do for the other person.

Myths

We're not trying to be trendy here by breaking grammatical rules. We're just going to destroy some of the grammatical myths.

- ✓ You can start a sentence with and, but, because, so or however.
- ✓ You can split infinitives. So you can say to boldly go.
- ✓ You can end a sentence with a preposition. In fact, it is something we should stand up for.
- ✓ And you can use the same word twice in a sentence if you can't find a better word.

Of course, this does not mean you should break these so-called rules all the time -just when they make a sentence flow better

Summary

- ✓ Stop and think before you start writing. Make a note of the points you want to make in a logical order.
- ✓ Prefer short words. Long words will not impress your customers or help your writing style.
- ✓ Use everyday English whenever possible. Avoid jargon and legalistic words, and always explain any technical terms you have to use.
- ✓ Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words. Try to stick to one main idea in a sentence.
- ✓ Use active verbs as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
- ✓ Be concise.
- ✓ Imagine you are talking to your reader. Write sincerely, personally, in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.
- ✓ And always check that your writing is clear, helpful, human and polite.