



For further information, please contact:
Corporate communications
Chief Executive's office
PO Box 14
Civic Centre
Motherwell ML1 1TW
t: 01698 302306
f: 01698 266709

designed by corporate communications
Chief Executive's office, February 2005



Plain English &
writing style guide



Introduction

Introduction

Working in local government, there will be times when most of us have to put something in writing on behalf of the council. This can be anything from a letter, memo or committee report to a leaflet, strategy document or news release.

The one thing all these written documents should have in common is that they are easy to read and understand. Using plain English is one way of doing this – it's faster to write, faster to read, and you get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

North Lanarkshire Council is a corporate member of the Plain English Campaign, which means that we are committed to clear communication in everything we write.

This guide contains tips and advice on how to get your message across – in writing – in a clear and simple way.

It also provides the basis of a 'house-style' for anyone whose job within the council involves any form of writing. This will ensure – as far as possible – that there is a consistent writing style in all North Lanarkshire Council publications.

As the use of language is constantly changing, this guide will change and develop over time and updates will be distributed as needed. If you would like further advice or information regarding anything in the guide (or anything that might not be covered), contact corporate communications on 01698 302306.

The ‘write’ approach?

Before you put pen to paper, have a think about why you are writing. It may be better to pick up the phone or speak to the person face to face. This can save a lot of time and resolve a problem in one easy step rather than lots of unnecessary paperwork being passed back and forwards.

But, there will be times when you need to write or when it’s better to write. And by using the suggestions set out in this guide, you can take the right approach to your writing.

It’s all in the planning

You should always think about what you want to say before you start writing. Make some brief notes if that helps. You should think about what you’re going to write; who you’re writing for; why you’re going to write it; what order you’re going to write it in; and what the effect will be when it’s written.

Plan the structure of your information, putting your key points in order. Start with the most important information, followed by the next most important and continue this down to the information of least importance.

Think about how to present the information. Pages and pages of text can be very off-putting and difficult to read. Break your writing down into sections and paragraphs, with headings if appropriate (use between four and six lines per paragraph). Or use a list of bullet points if it will make the information easier to understand (see the house style for tips on how to present and punctuate lists).

Keep sentences short and simple, with an average of between 15 and 20 words per sentence. Use a sentence to make one main point, but vary the length of your sentences to keep your reader interested. If you do write a long sentence, look at how it can be broken up to keep sentence length down.

And try as far as possible to put yourself in your readers' shoes. Think about what they are likely to know about the subject before you write. It may help to imagine you are face-to-face with them and use the everyday language you would use when speaking in person. Make it personal by using first-person pronouns like 'I', 'us', 'we' and 'you' rather than the third-person 'the council', 'the authority'.

It's simply there in black and white

Now that you're ready to get to work on your piece of writing, make sure you get to the point quickly. The first few paragraphs should answer the key questions of who, what, why, where, when and how. Don't lose your reader at the first hurdle by including irrelevant information at the start.

Use everyday, familiar language that is easily understood and avoid jargon or words and terms that are unique to local government where possible. If you have to use abbreviations, jargon or technical terms, explain what they mean – unless you know that your audience will understand them. Don't use official-sounding words or difficult to understand terms – keep it simple.

Use commands when writing instructions. 'Pay your council tax bill on time' is much more direct than 'your council tax bill should be paid on time'. If you feel this is too harsh or aggressive, put 'please' in front of the command. This keeps the tone polite but firm.

Use active verbs that tell the reader that someone does something ('we will send you a letter', 'I will consider your request') rather than the passive verb where something is done to someone ('a letter will be sent to you', 'your request will be considered').

This livens up your writing and stops it from sounding flat and dull as the active sentence is shorter and more efficient.

And keep this tone by using positive language. Don't focus on the negative side of life ('if you don't do this, we won't be able to help'), but state what you can do ('if you do this, we can help').

Avoid what are known as nominalisations – abstract nouns that are formed from the verb. These are known as hidden verbs because they tend to conceal an action or stop it moving, while verbs reveal the action and let it flow.

A nominalisation is the name of something that isn't a physical object but a process, technique or emotion. Examples include completion, introduction, discussion, arrangement and implementation. So, don't have 'a discussion', but 'discuss' how to keep them out of your writing!

And forget what you've been told about never starting a sentence with 'and' or 'but'. If it makes sense and sounds natural to use these words to connect two sentences, then put them in. And the same goes for using prepositions (for example – in, on, up, over, to, with, by, of, from) at the end of sentences.

Use punctuation to help your reader make sense of the writing – but don't go over the top. Know what punctuation to use when.

Use a full stop to separate sentences. Sentences should stand alone as a question, statement or command.

Use an exclamation mark to show strength of feeling – not often used in business writing though!

Use a question mark instead of a full stop at the end of a direct question ('what do you mean?'). Use a full stop after an indirect question ('he asked me what I meant.').

Use a comma to indicate a pause in a sentence.

Use a colon to introduce a list or to make a break when we expect something to follow.

Use a semi-colon to separate items in a list or to separate two closely-related sentences.

Use double inverted commas (quotation marks) to show direct speech. Use single inverted commas to highlight a particular word or phrase. Use single inverted commas to show speech within a direct quote.

Use brackets to separate a word (or a group of words) from the rest of the sentence. If what is in the brackets is a full sentence, put the full stop inside the close bracket. If not, the full stop is outside the bracket.

Use two dashes in the middle of a sentence in the same way that we use brackets. Or use a single dash in the same way we use a colon – to mark a break when we expect something to follow. Always use the en-dash (–), which can be found by using the ‘insert’ and ‘symbol’ function from the standard toolbar in Word. Do not confuse it with the hyphen (-).

Use a hyphen to distinguish between similar words such as recover and re-cover. Also use it in double-barrelled adjectives; with some prefixes; in phrases such as door-to-door; and to avoid words that would look odd without the hyphen.

Use the apostrophe to show that a letter or letters have been missed out (‘don’t’, ‘can’t’, ‘it’s’); to show possession (‘the children’s playground’, ‘employees’ handbook’); and in some expressions of time (‘two days’ notice’, ‘a week’s pay’).

Above all, be consistent. Don't change writing styles halfway through. If you refer to the council as 'the council', stick to that; don't suddenly start writing about 'the authority'. And don't go from 'e-mail' to 'email'. This confuses readers and the point of the message or information is lost.

And now, the end is near

When you have finished, re-read what you have written. Ask yourself if the language is suitable and check that the spelling, punctuation and grammar are correct. If you can, get someone else to proofread your work.

A good way of testing the language used and to check how the writing flows is to read it out loud. If it doesn't make sense to you when you hear it, it won't make sense to your readers.

Remember – to the reader, it's the information itself that's important, not how it's written (unless it's written badly and is difficult to understand). A well-written document should get the information across in one reading.

Plain English isn't about restricting creativity or writers' personal styles – it's about ensuring that your writing is clear, consistent and gets the message across.

Poorly written text not only distracts attention from the message, it also reflects badly on you and on standards of communication within the council.

By following the guidelines set out here, you can help deliver on our commitment to clear communication.

Let's get it 'write'.



Writing style guide

Writing style guide

Abbreviations

The name of an organisation should be used in full when it first appears in copy, followed immediately by its abbreviation (if it has one) within brackets. Then use only the abbreviation.

Well-known abbreviations do not have to be named in full, for example, **BBC** or **UK**. But do not use full stops between the letters.

Where the abbreviation is usually pronounced as a word, or acronym, use the initial capital followed by lower case: **Cosla**, **Nato**.

Capitals

Capitals should only be used for the first word of a sentence (or heading) or when using proper nouns. Councils and committees only take initial capitals when the reference is to a specific body: **North Lanarkshire Council**, but **the council**; **Strathclyde Police**, but **the police**. The same rule applies to people and titles: **Councillor Jim McCabe**, but **the councillor**.

Use initial capitals for important titles and positions where they are used in full and are followed (or preceded) by the name of the person who holds that position:

Chief Executive of North Lanarkshire Council, Gavin Whitefield; Mary Castles, Assistant Chief Executive of North Lanarkshire Council. But where the position only is referred to, lower case letters should be used: **the leader, the chief executive.** So, **Councillor Jim McCabe, Leader of North Lanarkshire Council** becomes **leader of the council.**

Collective nouns

A collective noun should be followed by a singular verb: **the council is; the committee was.** There can be exceptions such as **the police are, the people are.** The important thing is to be consistent – do not drift into a plural verb after starting with a singular one.

They or **their** can be used as a singular pronoun if it makes the sentence flow more naturally: **ask the customer for their reference number.** However – where possible – use plurals throughout: **ask customers for their reference number.**

If you are referring to an individual then you should use a singular pronoun: **him** or **her; he** or **she.** Avoid using **him/her; he/she.**

Dates

Use **1 January 2005**, not **1st January, 2005** or **January 1, 2005.** Do not use commas.

Numbers

Figures from one to nine (inclusive) should be written as words, except in sports scores, time of day, balance sheets, etc. From 10 upwards, use figures.

Where a sentence starts with a number, it should be written out in full: **Twenty-two members of staff are absent.** If the initial word of a sentence is a large number (£325 million), try to use a different form of words so that the sentence starts with a word, but keeps the same meaning.

Fractions should be written out in full if they're used alone: **half of the work**, but **1/4 inch**. Where possible, use decimals for numbers that include fractions: **17.5, 10.25**. Percentages: spell out per cent, except in tables or graphs: **17.5 per cent VAT**.

Million should always be written out in full: **£653 million**. The abbreviation 'M' should be used sparingly – for example, in headline writing: **£1.3M boost for residents**.

Numbers followed by an abbreviated description should not have a space in between: **20cm** but **20 centimetres**.

Ages should be bracketed after names: **John Smith (96)** as opposed to **John Smith, 96**. **96-year-old John Smith** is acceptable.

Numbers with four figures and above should be written with commas: **2,500; £1,000.**

Dashes/hyphens

Dashes can sometimes be used in place of a comma to help the flow of a long sentence. Do not confuse a dash (–) with a hyphen (-). A hyphen can be used in instances like **20-year-old woman, five-year period,** and when lower case and capital letters come together: **pro-British, anti-American.**

The correct form of dash is an en-dash. You can find it in Word by clicking on ‘insert’ and choosing ‘symbol’. Select the special characters tab and the en-dash is second on the list. Select any shortcut key you find convenient so you can use it regularly without having to go through this procedure (Control and -hyphen is a favoured option).

Apostrophes

Apostrophes should not be used with pronouns such as **ours, hers** or **its**. They should not be used with plural abbreviations: common errors are **MSP’s** instead of **MSPs,** and **CD’s** instead of **CDs**. When describing decades, the correct form is either the **1990s** or the **’90s,** not the **90’s** or **1990’s.**

In general, a word already ending with **s** should simply have an apostrophe added to indicate the possessive. However, it is now

practice to add **'s** when the original word has only one syllable and already ends with **s**: **Burns's poetry, St James's Park**. Where the original word ends with a hard **s** sound, use **'s**: **a local business's location**.

Avoid common mistakes such as **childrens' carers or womens' rights**. The correct form is **children's carers, women's rights**.

Titles

The chief executive should be referred to, in the first instance, as **Gavin Whitefield, Chief Executive of North Lanarkshire Council**. In run-on copy he should then be referred to as **the chief executive** (note the lower case c and e).

For councillors, the style should be **Councillor Jim McCabe**, then **Councillor McCabe**. If the title has to be abbreviated, use **Cllr** (without a full stop). Unless used as a title, councillor takes a lower case c: **the councillor**.

The provost should be referred to as **Councillor Patrick Connelly, Provost of North Lanarkshire**, and then as **the provost or Provost Connelly**. Although the provost is, technically, the convener of the council, we refer to him as the provost of the area and not of the council.

If using titles such as Dr, St, Rev, Fr or any service rank, full stops should not be used: **Fr Tom Jones**. In general, however, avoid the use of Mr and Mrs as titles. Use full forenames instead. Full stops should be used after initials in names: **John P. Smith**.

Avoid using initials before people's surnames: **Paul Jukes** not **P. Jukes**.

Degrees and honours after names should be written without full stops: **John Smith OBE, BSc**.

Quotes

Use single quotes in headings and double quotes in the body of a story; single quotes for a quotation within a quotation.

Times

Don't use full stops in am or pm: **1.20pm**. Don't leave a space between the numbers and the letters.

The 12-hour clock should be used at all times, but if you need to use the 24-hour clock, do not use full stops or colons. 6.30pm in 24-hour clock is **1830** or, occasionally, **1830 hours**, not **18.30** or **18:30**.

Height/distance

The plural of foot is feet. A wall may be **six feet** in height, not **six foot**.

Departments

Remember to draw distinctions between council departments and sections within those departments. Also, use lower case when referring to either a department or section. Where possible, leave out the words **department** or **section: this document is produced by corporate communications**.

Italics

Normally, italics should only be used to highlight the name of a journal, newspaper, TV programme you are referring to – ***The Herald, Newsnight***.

Italics should not be used on the website.

Lists

When writing lists, bullet points should be used, followed by either full sentences starting with a capital and ending with a full stop; or by a lower case letter and a semi-colon after each item, with the final item closed by a full stop. The word ‘and’ should also be added after the last semi-colon. Use a colon or en-dash to lead into your list.

Seasons

The seasons – **spring, summer, autumn** and **winter** – do not have capitals, unless at the start of a sentence.

Compass points

Similarly, **north, south, east** and **west** do not have capitals, unless at the start of a sentence: **councils in west central Scotland.**

Font

For guidance, refer to the council's corporate identity guidelines.

Spacing

For printing purposes, one space should be used after full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons.



Words to watch

Words to watch

Accept/except

Accept is a verb: 'yes, I'll accept your offer';
except is a preposition: 'everyone's going
except me'.

Advice/advise

Advice is a noun, as in 'my advice'; while
advise is the verb: 'please advise me...'

Affect/effect

In general, affect is used as a verb – to
affect/have an effect on: 'How will that
affect me?'; while effect is used as a noun: 'It
had a bad effect on me'.

And/but

It is acceptable to use 'and' or 'but' at the
start of a sentence, provided it is a full and
proper sentence.

An

Use only when the next word starts with a
vowel. Do not use before hotel or historical,
etc.

Anticipate

Does not mean expect. If you mean expect,
say it.

Amongst

Avoid. Use **among**.

At this moment in time

Avoid. Use **now**.

Take cognisance of

Never use. Alternatives are **take account of**, **take note** or simply **note**.

Compare with

Use when contrasting two subjects.

Compare to

Use when likening two subjects.

Contemporary

Does not necessarily mean at the present time. It means at the same time.

Complement/compliment

Complement is to make something complete, or adds to something; to compliment someone is to praise them.

Criteria

This word is plural. The singular is criterion.

Different

Always followed by 'from', not 'to' or 'than'.

Direct/directly

Differentiate between direct and directly. Direct means without passing through an intermediary. Directly means shortly.

Ever

Do not routinely use with 'biggest', 'best', 'smallest', etc – these are seldom improved by the addition of ever.

Fewer

Use for numbers. Use 'less' for quantity: **fewer people attended** and **there was less water in the pool.**

Government

Use lower case **g**: **the government is divided on the issue.** Also, government is singular: **the government has agreed** is correct, while **the government have agreed** is wrong.

Hopefully

Use carefully. It means full of hope, not I hope. Better to use **we hope.**

I/me

David and I attended the meeting is correct, but **the agenda was sent to David and I** is wrong. **The agenda was sent to David and me** is correct. If in doubt, separate each subject before completing the sentence: **the agenda was sent to David; the agenda was sent to me.**

In order to

Avoid. Use **to**.

-ise/-ize

Use **-ise** as in **reorganise**. The suffix **-ize** is used in America.

Lady

Avoid, unless the person being referred to is the wife of a titled male. Use **woman**. The only exception may be when addressing an audience in a speech: **Ladies and gentlemen...**

Licence/license

Licence is a noun, as in 'driving licence', while license is a verb.

Media

This word is plural. The singular is **medium**.

More than/over

Unless referring to height, use more than: **the budget is more than £1.4 million**, not **over £1.4 million**. **He was over six feet in height**.

MP/MSP

Should be written without full stops after each letter: **John Reid MP**, not **M.P. Jack McConnell MSP**, not **M.S.P.**

Nevertheless

Avoid. Use **but, however, even so**.

None

This word is singular, meaning not one: **none of them was available** is correct. **None of the councillors were present** is wrong.

Notwithstanding

Avoid. Use **even if, despite, still, yet**.

Onto

Often used when **on to** is more accurate.

Owing to/in view of the fact that

Avoid. **Because** can usually be used instead.

Practice/practise

Practice is the noun eg, 'some practice will help you improve', while practise is the verb, 'you must practise if you want to improve'.

Principal/principle

Principal is generally used as an adjective – 'the principal reason' – except when it refers to the principal of a college or university, while principle is always used as a noun, 'on principle'.

Prior to

Avoid. Use **before**.

Provided

Use instead of **providing: I will attend providing I have enough time** is wrong; **I will attend provided I have enough time** is correct.

Referendum

This word is singular. The plural is referenda, although the use of the modern plural, referendums, is also acceptable.

Report

A common mistake is to refer to a report into: **the report into the Lanarkshire E-coli outbreak** is wrong. **The report of an inquiry into the Lanarkshire E-coli outbreak** is correct.

Stationary/stationery

Stationery is writing paper and envelopes etc. Stationary means not moving, standing still.

Try

Always follow with 'to': **We will try and get the information** is wrong. **We will try to get the information** is correct.

Unique

Applies only to something that is the sole specimen of its kind. It can rarely (though sometimes) be qualified with almost, virtually, etc.

Utilise

Avoid. Use **use** instead.

Whilst

Avoid. Use **while**.

Other points to note

Do not refer to a person's gender – it is very rarely relevant.

Do not exclude people unintentionally by using phrases such as manpower or manning the office. Use staff, workers, employees, staffing the office etc.

Do not refer to a woman in her husband's name or just by using her surname – use forenames at all times. This is particularly useful when captioning photographs that may feature elected members and their partners.

Don't use spokesman or spokeswoman, chairman or chairwoman – use spokesperson/chairperson or chair/convener etc.

Notes

