Plain English

Some guidelines for simpler, more effective writing

Introduction

Our written communications are a persistent representation of us to our audience. If we break the accepted rules of writing we risk being seen as unprofessional or worse. There are a few simple guidelines that, if applied, will make written communications more readable and more professional.

This document is not intended to be a primer in English grammar or syntax, but to address some of the more common mistakes. Some references are provided for those who wish to find out more.

Guidelines

Use shorter sentences

Do not write long, complicated sentences. This is the greatest contribution you can make towards comprehensible writing.

Punctuation

"When in doubt, leave it out." Do not use punctuation unless it is necessary. If you are unsure about correct usage apply 'Use shorter sentences' above and the problem will probably go away.

Corporate entities

Corporate entities, such as the company that employs me and its customer or prospect companies, take the singular: Use "Widgets is/has/cares …" rather than "Widgets are/have/care …", and "Customer Limited wishes to acquire …" rather than "Customer Limited wish to acquire …"

Its and it's

'It's' is a contraction of 'it is'. 'Its' is the possessive form of the pronoun it and is never written with an apostrophe

Voice

Use the active rather than passive voice. Write "Widgets will respond within 24 hours" rather than "A response will be provided by Widgets within 24 hours".

Put statements in positive form.

Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colourless, hesitating, non-committal language.

Do not invent words

This is a major problem among IT companies, especially American ones. There is no such word as inputted. An administrator administers, not administrates. You reduce costs; you do not cost-reduce. (And you use, not utilise.)

Use lower case letters except for proper nouns (names)

Do not capitalise words unnecessarily. Capitalising all nouns is correct in some languages, for instance German, but not in English. This applies to titles too; Joe Bloggs is our chief executive officer or CEO, but not our Chief Executive Officer.

Do not use jargon

Use simple English words. Use industry-specific terms where essential but try to limit their use.

Numbers

By convention we write the numbers one to twelve (or one to twenty according to some) in full rather than as digits. For instance, write "Widgets will respond within four hours" rather than "Widgets will respond within 4 hours".

Some other minor transgressions

  Many of our clients will have had certain rules drummed into them at school. These rules are nowadays often ignored, but if you can apply them without being stilted then even the most pedantic among them will have no reason to complain.

To boldly split infinitives

  "To go boldly …" as opposed to "to boldly go …" Not considered as big an error as it once was.

That and which

  Another convention now often ignored, this is best defined as "that describes, which qualifies". For example, "Widgets is the company that will ensure …", or Widgets, which is the world's third largest IT services company, will ensure …"

Ending a sentence with a preposition

  Some believe passionately that a preposition is something with which you should never end a sentence; others believe that it is a perfectly acceptable thing to end a sentence with.

Plurals

  Criteria is the plural of criterion, so "One criterion for success is …" not "One criteria for success is …"   Data is, strictly speaking, the plural of datum. However, using data in the singular is accepted usage although some of us stick-in-the-mud purists refuse to entertain such slipshod usage ☺

Useful References

The Economist Style Guide

  This is one of the best. Available from the Economist bookshop (see www.economist.com for on-line ordering) or free (at the moment) on the web at http://economist.com/research/StyleGuide/

The Plain English Campaign

  Plain English Campaign is an independent pressure group fighting for public information to be written in plain English. 'Public information' means anything people have to read to get by in their daily lives. 'Plain English' is language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading. http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/ includes details of an on-line course (for £20) entitled 'Introducing business writing'.

The Complete Plain Words

  This book by Sir Ernest Gowers was written (in 1954) to encourage the use of plain English in the UK civil service. It is still one of the best there is. It "is wholly concerned with … the choice and arrangement of words in such a way as to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another".

The Elements of Style

  Asserting that one must first know the rules to break them, this classic reference book is a must-have for any conscientious writer. Written by William Strunk Jnr and first published in 1918, it can be found at http://www.bartleby.com/141/ and at many academic websites. As the song says, "A little old-fashioned but that's all right."

Eats, Shoots and Leaves

  Passionate and evangelical, Lynne Truss's 'Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation' is a best-seller with reason: it's very good.

Why Business People Speak Like Idiots

  Subtitled 'The Bullfighter's Guide', I giggled my way through it. It should be mandatory reading for anyone who puts finger to keyboard in the pursuit of corporate communications. Buy a copy for every one of your marketing staff. There's also a website at http://www.fightthebull.com/