

Plain language guide

Introduction

Plain language is writing which:

- is easy for your reader to understand
- is concise and to the point
- is appropriate to the circumstances

The INtouch team and any groups or services which contribute 'official' content to INtouch are expected to adhere to these guidelines for the use of plain language. All official content will be reviewed by the INtouch team before being published on INtouch. Minor changes may be made to official content by the INtouch team in order to comply with these plain language guidelines. Any content which requires major changes will be referred back to the content provider for revision. The INtouch team can make major revisions to a text if authorised to do so by the content provider.

Guidelines

Use personal writing

Use personal language that includes words such as 'I', 'we' and 'you' rather than terms such as 'the undersigned', 'the organisation' or 'the occupier'. Write as if you are talking to your reader in person.

Use concise writing

Keep your writing short and to the point but take care not to appear blunt and impersonal. Replace phrases with a single word if possible and avoid using words with three or more syllables (polysyllabic words) when words with one or two syllables will do. Your sentences should generally be no more than 15 to 20 words in length, but take care not to shorten sentences by leaving out words like 'a', 'the' and 'that'. Vary your sentence length to make your writing more interesting.

Use verbs actively

Use verbs actively rather than passively. Active verbs make your writing seem more direct, lively and personal. Use 'subject – verb – object' sentences. For example, 'the surveyor wrote a report' rather than 'a report was written by the surveyor'. Try to make a person (or organisation) the subject of your sentence – say what that person did rather than just saying that something has been done. Also, avoid turning verbs into nouns. For example, say 'he achieved' rather than 'his achievements included'.

Use repetition

Don't worry about using a term more than once in the same sentence or section of text. It is better to repeat a term than use a less suitable alternative and risk confusing your reader.

Avoid jargon

Do not use jargon (the specialist language of a subject or group of people), acronyms (formed from the first letters of the words they represent) or abbreviations unless you have said what these terms mean. Do not presume that the reader has any prior knowledge of the subject that you are writing about, and make sure that anything you refer to is clearly explained.

Avoid gender terms

Never assume the gender of your reader. Avoid sexist writing by either rewriting your sentence or including both genders. Avoid saying 'he or she' and 's/he' if it is possible to say 'they' instead. Try to rewrite your sentence to include a neutral word such as 'people'.

Avoid negative sentences

Turn a negative sentence into a positive sentence. Avoid words like 'except', 'fail' and so on. Positive words and phrases are simpler, more interesting and easier for your reader to understand.

Avoid qualifiers and intensifiers

Avoid any qualifiers or intensifiers (words such as 'rather', 'very', 'extremely' and 'somewhat'). These words are unnecessary as they do not add any meaning to your writing. Use precise words instead.

Avoid double negatives

Avoid using two or more negative words in a sentence. It is clearer to say 'the training was effective' rather than 'the training was not ineffective'.

Avoid noun strings

Avoid using strings of two or more nouns in a sentence. For example, say 'The world's population is increasing' rather than 'World population is increasing'. Noun strings are difficult to understand as they lack connecting words such as 'of', 'for', 'about', 'in' and the possessive 's' (as in 'world's') that show how the nouns relate to each other.

Rules

Acronyms

Only use an acronym if it is the name of a group or organisation. The acronym should be in capital letters, with no full stops in between the letters, followed by the full name of the organisation in brackets, with initial capitals for those words which form the acronym. For example: ASH (Action on Smoking and Health).

Always include the full meaning of an acronym, and do not rely on the acronym itself to convey the purpose and activities of the group or organisation.

Abbreviations

Avoid using abbreviations wherever possible, although abbreviations which have become the common name for a group or organisation are acceptable. These should be written in capital letters, with full stops in between the letters and no spaces. For example: R.A.F.

Date format

Dates should be written as the day, then the month, then (if appropriate) the year (for example, 12th October 2003). Where no year is given, it is acceptable for the month to be shown first if this reads better as part of a sentence (for example, 'On October 12th we will be celebrating...'). When you write a range of dates, separate them with words rather than a hyphen (for example, '12th to 13th of October'). When you include a day of the week, do not put a comma between the day and the date.

Time format

Times should be written in 12 hour clock format. For times on the hour, no minutes should be shown (for example, 9am not 9.00am). There should be no space before the am or pm (for example, 9pm not 9 pm) and no full stops or spaces between the letters (for example, 9am not 9 a.m. or 9 a m). For times that are not on the hour, there should be a full stop between the hour and the minutes, rather than a colon (for example, 9.30am not 9:30am). Midday should be shown as 12 noon, and midnight as 12 midnight.

Use of numbers

Generally, write any numbers from one to nine in words. Use numerals for 10 and over. However, you should spell out numbers at the beginning of a sentence or rewrite the sentence. When you use a range of numbers within a sentence, try to be consistent by using either words or numerals (for example, '9 to 11 year olds' not 'nine to 11 year olds'). Include a comma in numbers with four or more digits (for example, 2,658).

Capitalisation

Only use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence, for the first letter of a title or sub-title, and where they are part of a proper name (for example, Sure Start) or a proper noun (for example, Monday or Christmas). Write all titles with only the initial letter in capitals (for example, 'Help and advice for tenants' not 'Help and Advice for Tenants').

Ampersand

Do not use the ampersand (&) sign. Always write the word 'and' in full, unless the ampersand forms part of a group or organisation's official name.

Bullet points

For lists containing few words use lower case initial letters and no full stops (the list should be preceded by a colon). For bulleted sentences start with an initial capital and end each with a full stop.

Ellipses

Where using ellipses (...) use three dots only. Use a character space after the dots but not before (for example, 'our aims are...' not 'our aims are ...').

Contact details

Clearly listed contact details should form part of any information that is published on INtouch. Wherever possible, give both a telephone number and an email address, and also a full postal address if this is appropriate. Never put a full stop or a comma at the end of an email address. Always give the name of a contact person if this is possible.

Referring to websites

Do not refer readers to websites. Links to other sites are not available though digital TV and you should not assume that the reader has access to the internet. For this reason, you should never list a website address as part of your contact details. We only refer to websites on INtouch where there is a special reason for doing so (for example, when talking about chat room safety for children, or saying what you can do at your local computer centre). We always inform the reader that the website listed can only be viewed by using a computer.

Spelling and grammar

All official content on INtouch must display correct spelling and grammar. Please check your text for correct spelling and grammar, and make sure that all details given are correct, before submitting your information to INtouch.

Use of formatting

Provide your content in as plain a text format as possible. All formatting and layout of content is handled by the INtouch team. We can incorporate the following kinds of formatting into the text:

Sub-headings, Bullet points, Numbered lists, Line spaces, Bold text (usually only for sub-headings, not used within the body of the text) and Tables (for lists of figures, used only where this is absolutely necessary)

There is no use of italics, underscoring, outline text and similar formatting features anywhere on the site, and no choice of text size, text colour, justification or font type for any content contributions. Therefore, you should not rely on formatting to help convey the meaning of a text – all contributions should be easily understandable in a plain text format.

Further information:

Campaign for Plain English website: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>