The basics of good writing

When you're asked to write something, it might feel like another thing to add to your to-do list. This short guide will make it feel like less of a chore and help you get your message across to your readers.

At school, we were taught to write formally, but in real life, when we're speaking, we tend to use informal, conversational language, and this is usually more effective when writing. Correct English and acceptable English are two very different things. Of course, you don't want to litter your writing with bad spelling, misplaced apostrophes and inconsistent tenses, but sometimes, it's OK to break the 'rules'. And it's absolutely fine to start sentences with 'and' or 'but'.

The average reading age in the UK is 9-11 years old, so your writing needs to be simple and easy to understand. That's why using corporate language or jargon is usually a bad idea – because it makes little sense to readers. Whenever you can, use plain English.

Verb-based writing

Because a verb is a doing word (like writing or reading), it makes sense that using them will bring life to your writing. Using nouns does the opposite. While verb-based writing conveys action, in noun-based writing, nothing really happens. In the following two sentences, the verb-based one is shorter and easier to read.

The project officer made a decision to conduct a review of the operations (noun-based)

The project officer decided to review the operations (verb-based)

Using the active voice

The active voice is bold and forceful, and it keeps your sentences shorter; the passive voice, meanwhile, is clunkily formal and focusses on the object rather than the subject. Here's an example:

Passive: **A great time was had by all**

Active: **We all had a great time**

If you need to tell the difference between the two voices, remember this: the active version focuses on people doing things, while the passive version looks at things being done by people.

How to write shorter sentences

To make things easier for our readers, we need to keep our sentences short and simple. There are a couple of ways to make your sentences shorter.

1. Split long sentences into two.

Look at this *very* long sentence:

The government can now better understand the potential location and impact of where the biggest earthquake will occur within a 1.5 million square kilometre area and is using the information to assess and prioritise seismic upgrades at its facilities. [39 words]

A strategically placed full stop turns it into two shorter sentences.

The government can now better understand the potential location and impact of where the biggest earthquake will occur within a 1.5 million square kilometre area. [25 words] It is using the information to assess and prioritise seismic upgrades at its facilities. [14 words]

2. Don't overwrite

Removing redundant words can make your sentences much shorter; for example, 'during the course of' can become 'during'. Which of these two sentences sounds better to you?

We need to promote utilisation of the new website

We need people to use the new website

Other key pointers for good writing

- Use a strong call to action. You need to tell the reader what you want him or her to do, whether that's taking part in a survey or simply clicking a hyperlink.

- Be personal and don't use stilted formal language. When you sound like a human, people generally respond to you.

- Plan your writing with structure. Your sentences and paragraphs guide the reader through your text so always lead with your strongest point. Put the most important details up front: the what, where, when, who, why.

- Don't use wishy-washy writing. Instead of words like 'may', 'hope', 'could' and 'perhaps', use imperative (command) or promise words such as 'will', 'can' and 'do'. This strengthens your copy and makes you sound confident, which builds the trust of readers. Use positive, rather than negative, language, as this will encourage and engage your readers.

Hopefully you'll feel more confident after reading this guide, so keep writing – and remember that it doesn't have to be perfect!