



Write for the Environment Agency

Now includes writing for our website and intranet

reasoned  
active  
vibrant  
confident

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Environment Agency

Rio House

Waterside Drive, Aztec West

Almondsbury, Bristol BS32 4UD

Tel: 0870 8506506

Email: [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk)

[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)

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Written by David Cameron

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## The write stuff

One of the central themes of our corporate strategy *Creating a better place*, is that we bring a much better customer focus to our work. The aim is that we will make the Environment Agency easy to do business with. A major part of that is making all of the materials we produce, in print and online, easy for our customers to understand so that they can help to improve the environment.

Even though our website attracts a lot of visitors, our surveys show that many people find it difficult to use. This is simply because we do not write content specifically for our website and intranet so that it meets the needs of our customers. This new edition of *Write for the Environment Agency* includes tips on how to write for the website and intranet as well as some new examples of good and bad writing.

We launched our plain English programme in 2004. Since then we have made great strides in improving the quality of our written English. We now have a network of over 120 plain English champions promoting clear writing across the organisation. Now it is time to go that bit further, and use plain English in all of our written communications.

**We are all writers. But let's all become good writers,  
in all media.**



**Barbara Young**  
Chief Executive, Environment Agency

# Background

The way that we write about the Environment Agency and the tone of voice we use greatly affect the impression that we make on our readers.

Most of the writing we do – communicating with business and the public – is writing to inform. In this kind of writing it is vital that we write in a way that allows our readers to understand what we want to say quickly and easily. It's all part of providing good customer service. Clearly written documents mean fewer customer complaints because people can understand them first time.

Becoming an organisation that is easy to do business with is one of the main aims of the *More for the environment* programme, through which we will achieve the aims of our corporate strategy, *Creating a better place*.

And remember that every time we send out a letter, leaflet, publication or publish on our website our customers regard that as the voice of the Environment Agency. So it is important that we make everything we write clear and easy to understand.

Our brand gives us the direction we need to do this. It identifies our strengths and what makes us different from other organisations.

- We base our decisions on facts, not politics, which makes us **reasoned**.
- We don't just argue for improvements to the environment, we take concerted action to make them happen. This makes us **active**.
- We are not lobbyists but we are positive champions of the environment, making us **vibrant**.
- Our work at a local level is strengthened by our national perspective which makes us **confident**.

**So when we write for the Environment Agency, if we write in a way that reflects our brand we will write in a way that serves our customers.**

Here are some examples.  
They are not always direct 'translations' into plain English, but suggestions of a more appropriate way to write to our customers.

# reasoned writing

Reasoned writing is logical, measured and fair. We explain what we want to say clearly and concisely. We know that our policy decisions are founded on good reasoned thought and experience, and our writing should reflect this. We do not make statements that we can't back up. But we do not use this as an excuse to sit on the fence.

Reasoned writing is best suited to writing that relates to our work as a regulator.

## Write like this

'Our staff assess the applications we receive. In special circumstances we will set up a specialist unit to look at applications. For example we have set up strategic permitting teams that look at groups of applications from companies wanting to transfer from one type of regulation to another. Grouping these applications saves us time and money and we can bring staff with specialist knowledge together. It also allows area teams to deal with applications that require more local knowledge.'

## Not like this

'Applications are generally determined by environmental protection staff (service delivery teams) in Areas or specialist units set up under special circumstances. For example, strategic permitting groups have been created to determine tranches of applications from installations transferring from IPC or WML regulation to PPC under the transition timetable. Such groups help maximise efficiency and effectiveness by using specialist expertise and knowledge of individual industry sectors (e.g. organic chemicals) and focusing on a particular activity (applications). They also free up Area-based teams to deal with applications for new installations, variations, transfers and surrenders, which require more local knowledge.'

# active writing

Active writing is direct. It talks about doing things and uses verbs rather than nouns to get our point across. Use active language when writing for the general public when you need to explain our work to them. This example is from a consultation document.

## Write like this

'The quality of the water in our rivers, seas and estuaries has improved significantly in the last ten years. However it will have to improve further if we are to achieve the 'good' status that the Water Framework Directive requires. If the organisations involved work together we will be more likely to achieve 'good' status, and this is the approach we want to take.'

## Not like this

'River, estuarine and coastal water quality in England and Wales has improved significantly over the past 10 years. However, further improvements in water quality are needed to ensure that good ecological status is achieved under the Water Framework Directive. Co-delivery is a key part of the Water Framework Directive and the Agency wants to set up as many ways of working in partnership as possible.'

# vibrant writing

Vibrant writing brings our work to life. It is writing that shows enthusiasm and tells the stories behind our work. It makes well-chosen points simply and clearly. Vibrant writing uses short sentences with powerful, simple words. It is best suited to writing that wishes to influence its audience, not just inform it.

## Write like this

‘Our lakes and rivers don’t just supply fish. They unlock the great outdoors, providing millions of people with a vital antidote to the pressures of modern life. They are a barometer of the health of the natural environment and contribute to wildlife conservation. And they are a part of our country’s heritage, as vital as the village green or local park.’

## Not like this

‘Healthy fisheries support angling and commercial fishing as well as contributing to wildlife conservation and biodiversity. Moreover, society as a whole benefits from the improved health and the education that stem from people’s enjoyment of this natural resource. Indeed, it is government policy to make the most of the benefits that fisheries have to offer to local communities and for the country as a whole.’

# confident writing

Above all our writing must be confident. Confident writing communicates messages clearly. It talks about the Environment Agency as a whole and uses ‘we’ and ‘us’.

It makes clear statements about what needs to be done and our role in achieving it. Confident writing always uses plain English. It also means using language that people outside our organisation will relate to and find stimulating. Use confident writing in your letters and emails, your leaflets and when you write for the website or intranet.

## Write like this

We know that development doesn’t have to harm the environment. We know that if it is well located, planned and designed, it can actually make improvements to the environment and provide a better place to live and work.

We will ensure that we take all the environmental risks and opportunities into account in all our plans. And we will always comply with the law and government guidance when we do.

## Not like this

The Agency will apply Environmental Assessment to certain plans, programmes and projects on the basis of the environmental risks and opportunities. The Agency will discharge its Environmental Assessment duties for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) under the relevant legislation and government guidance (including the Environment Act, 1995; EU Directives on SEA and EIA; and Regulations) in a consistent manner and to high standards.

Where Integrated or Sustainability Appraisal is also applied to these plans, programmes or projects EIA/SEA and Sustainability/Integrated Appraisal will be integrated into one process.

# How to do it

## Getting started

Before you start to write, think about what you want to say, who you want to say it to and why they need to know. Then think about what you want your readers to do as a result of reading your words. This will help you to work out what information you want to include and the order in which it will appear. If you do this before you start, your finished document is much more likely to be successful.

When you've sketched out all your ideas, group them into themes and decide on a logical order. The information you include and the order it appears in should make sense to your readers. Write down some headings that will give a thumbnail sketch of your main points.

Don't just do this for reports. Planning difficult letters or emails in this way will make writing them much easier for you. **Grab your readers' attention. Don't mess about, put the most important message up front.**

**Make it impossible for your readers to avoid your main points.**

If you're writing a report:

- present your main point or conclusion first and then the supporting arguments
- stick your head above the parapet and make recommendations.
- attach supporting details as appendices – but only if absolutely relevant.

## Your job is to inform not to impress

The mark of a true expert is one who can convey a complicated message simply and concisely. You will not impress anyone if you write long and detailed reports in bureaucratic language. Use these guidelines and remember – keep it short.

## Write in plain English

Plain English is clear and concise, uses everyday language and talks to the readers. It does not write in a bureaucratic style and does not use jargon.

There are many advantages to writing in plain English:

- it's much easier to read
- it uses fewer words (and so uses less paper)
- it gets the point across quickly and easily.

There are five key principles:

- short sentences
- active verbs
- 'you' and 'we'
- use words that are appropriate for the reader
- write with verbs rather than nouns.

## Tips

- Plan first, then write
- Make a list of headings to develop the structure
- Put your main point or conclusion first
- Use plain English

## Short sentences

Short sentences are easier to understand than long ones. Long sentences (like this one) can be hard to understand because the readers need to go back to the beginning of the sentence after reaching the end before they can fully understand what you are saying. You should write to an average sentence length of 15–20 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) – following the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence – plus perhaps one other related point.

## Use ‘active’ verbs

Using ‘active’ verbs shows that we are confident. Active verbs make writing more lively and easier to read and understand. Passive verbs make writing heavy and less easy to understand.

Take a look at this sentence:

*In 2007 a total of £850 million of expenditure was made by the Environment Agency.*

The verb in this sentence is ‘was made’ and it appears toward the end of the sentence. The thing that is doing the verb – known as the ‘agent’ – is at the end of the sentence following the verb.

Let’s rewrite this sentence with the verb near the beginning.

*The Environment Agency made £850 million of expenditure in 2007, or The Environment Agency spent £850 million in 2007.*

The original version of this sentence is written in the passive voice, the two above in the active. In the passive voice we have had to introduce the words ‘was’ and ‘by’ and the sentence started to become clumsy.

It is also possible to write the passive version of the sentence as:

*In 2007 a total of £850 million of expenditure was made.*

This removes the agent from the sentence completely. This is the worst aspect of the passive verb because readers can find it hard to fully understand sentences without agents.

For example:

- *The charges have been set.*
- *The licence was revoked.*
- *The decision was made.*

None of these examples has an agent ‘doing’ the verb. So the readers do not know who set the charges, revoked the licence or made the decision.

To make sure that you write in the active voice put your agent at, or near, the beginning of your sentence and follow it with the verb.

We are a confident organisation – we always say when we are responsible for something.

## Tips

- *Stick to ‘one sentence, one idea’*
- *Aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words*
- *Vary the length of your sentences*
- *Use active verbs to make your writing more lively*



## Use everyday language

When you are talking to your readers, say exactly what you mean using the simplest words that fit – the words you would use if you were talking to them.

This does not necessarily mean only using simple words – just words that the readers will understand. Jargon is a type of language that is only understood by a particular group of people. We have lots of it – both technical and public sector jargon.

We need to be very careful that we are not making our information too difficult for our readers to understand. You can use jargon when writing internally to people who you are sure will understand the terms and phrases – it can be a useful form of shorthand.

But do not use this jargon when you are writing for an external audience, no matter how small. And do not use it when you write for our website or intranet.

Avoid acronyms and abbreviations whenever possible, even if they are ones you use in your day-to-day work. Your readers will not mind having something spelt out. They will mind not understanding abbreviations and acronyms.

## Use verbs rather than nouns

In the past we have used a lot of words like implementation, decision and revocation. These are called ‘nominalisations’ and are formed from verbs. The problem is that they are often 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 very dull and heavy reading.

For example:

| Verb        | Nominalisation |
|-------------|----------------|
| complete    | completion     |
| introduce   | introduction   |
| deliver     | delivery       |
| revoke      | revocation     |
| implement   | implementation |
| provide     | provision      |
| fail        | failure        |
| arrange     | arrangement    |
| investigate | investigation  |

For example:

‘To cover the costs associated with the revocation of an authorisation, subsistence charges continue to be payable in the year that an authorisation is revoked or cancelled.’

This passage includes three nominalisations and two passive verbs. If we replace the nominalisations with the verbs they come from and write the sentence in the active voice, it becomes shorter and much easier to understand. It will also tell readers who is revoking or cancelling the authorisation.

‘If we revoke or cancel your authorisation you will still need to pay subsistence charges for that year to cover our costs.’

In this version we have replaced the nominalisation ‘revocation’ with the verb ‘revoke’ and put the verbs ‘revoked’ and ‘cancelled’ into the active voice.

## Tips

- Write in the way that you would speak to someone
- Use everyday language, not jargon
- Look for the hidden verbs in words like decision and implementation
- Use verbs instead of nouns to make your sentences shorter



## Use ‘you’ and ‘we’

You can also see in the previous example that we have referred to the Environment Agency as ‘we’ and the person or company we are writing to as ‘you’. Using these small powerful words makes your writing much easier for your readers to understand. It also makes your writing more personal.

We refer to our customers as **you**. This makes our communications clearer and more confident.

## ‘The Agency’

In the past we called ourselves ‘the Agency’ and then referred to ourselves as ‘it’. We do not do this any more. We now call ourselves ‘the Environment Agency’, ‘we’ or ‘us’.

We refer to our customers as ‘you’. This makes our communications clearer and more confident.

## Write about the effects of your work, not about the way that we organise ourselves.

The Environment Agency does many amazing things. But when we write for an external audience we tend to talk about how we do things, not about the effect we have. Our readers are not very likely to be interested in our plans and strategies. They want to know about the difference we make to the environment.

This shows that we are confident and active.

For example:

‘The Agency promotes recreation in a number of ways from the provision of facilities to the production of leaflets and guides.’

Becomes:

‘We want you to enjoy using our rivers. To help you we provide facilities and produce leaflets and guides.’

## Tips

- Use ‘you’ and ‘we’ to make your writing confident and make us sound less bureaucratic
- Use ‘The Environment Agency’, ‘we’ or ‘us’ – not ‘The Agency’
- Write about our impact on the environment

# Writing for our website and intranet

Thousands of our customers use our website and intranet every day. But even though our sites attract a lot of visitors, our surveys have found that many people find them difficult to use. Here's how we are working to improve our sites.



We have been working closely with our customers to find out what makes our sites hard to use. We've found out who our main audiences are and what they want, and have used this information to develop profiles of typical customers for our sites.

We have developed eight typical customers; five for our website and three for our intranet. We have described them in detail: how old they are, what their interests are and, in particular, what they want from our sites.

To meet our typical customers look on the intranet or talk to your department's web or intranet publisher.

From now on when you write for our website or intranet you should always do so with the needs of our typical customers in mind. This approach is widely acknowledged as one of the most effective ways of developing websites and intranets and is extensively used in the public and private sectors.

# How to write for the screen

All of the techniques for writing plainly apply equally to writing for the website and intranet – but there are some differences.

## Readers behave differently online

Most people access websites for a particular reason, to complete what we call a ‘goal’. For example, their goal might be to find out about our flexible-working scheme, register to receive flood warnings or to purchase a fishing rod licence.

Where people will be prepared to read a book line by line, research into how readers use websites shows that they don’t read a page from beginning to end. They scan a web page looking for ‘keywords’ (they are also known as ‘carewords’), which are the kind of words they would type in to a search engine like Google.

It is unusual for users to just look around a website for information. Our research into how our customers use our website and intranet shows that they come to perform tasks, not to surf. We need to write content for our sites that makes it easy for our customers to perform those tasks.

Web users are impatient people! They have high expectations and want everything now. If they can’t see what they are looking for quickly, they will leave our site and they probably won’t come back.

Think about how you use the web. What sites do you visit? Have you ever used a government site like ours? Perhaps you visited your council’s site to get some information. How did you use that site? Did you surf around looking for information, or did you have a specific task to perform? How about other sites? Have you booked a holiday, checked the cricket scores or bought a CD, for example?

These are typical tasks that we perform online.

## Emphasise the ‘carewords’

Carewords are the words the customer cares about. That is, the words they use to look for information as they scan the page content. When you have written your copy, identify the carewords within it. Then, when you publish it in the content management system, emphasise the carewords in bold type. For example: If you hold an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) or Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) permit, we can fast track your **application to switch to a back-up fuel**.

Only use **bold**. Do not use block capitals – they make copy harder to read; don’t underline text as it will look like a link to another page and use italics sparingly because they are not always easy to read on screen.

## Information is displayed differently on screen

When we publish in print we control the size of the document, how many words appear on a page and how those words are laid out. On websites we can control the layout of the page but the users' computer screen controls how many words they see at any one time, depending on the resolution they have chosen.

Try changing the screen resolution on your computer and see how the number of words on the screen changes.

## Plan what you want on your pages before you get near to a computer.

### Before you start

#### Think – is this information already on the site?

Someone else may have already published this information. Maybe all you need to do is update some existing pages. Don't duplicate information, readers will not know which is the most up to date or reliable.

#### Think about where your pages fit in.

A lot of what we do links to other parts of the business. So think about your pages in relation to the whole of the rest of the site, not just your bit of it.

### Link to other pages and sites

Maybe this information is available on another website we don't run. If you are writing for the intranet, does the information exist on our website? If so why not link to the other site and save us time and money? If other sites have complementary information then link to it. Don't waste time publishing material that is already available somewhere else (but do bear in mind copyright laws.)

As a rule of thumb, it's fine to link to any information held on public sector websites or the homepage of a commercial site, but get written permission from the webmaster if you want to link deeper into a commercial site.

And as simple as it sounds, never link back from our website to our intranet, the link won't work for our external customers.

### Create a logical set of pages

Look at your information. Think about your reader approaching your information and what they are likely to be looking for and how much knowledge they might have. First, work out the structure of the content you need to produce. If you have lots to explain, you probably need to break it down into a set of pages. Each page should cover an individual topic. Leave out anything that's just background material, and doesn't help the reader achieve their goal quickly.

For example, if you are writing about what people need to do with their hazardous waste, you may need a page on identifying the waste as hazardous, a page containing all the forms people need to complete, and a page on how to dispose of it. Putting all of this on one page is going to overwhelm your reader.

Make sure you label the pages clearly so that people know that it is the page they need. For example, 'Know your hazardous waste', 'Hazardous waste forms' and 'Getting rid of hazardous waste'. Don't use complex terms that may make sense to you, but your audience may not understand.

## Work out the structure of each page

On each individual page, think about what your reader needs to do while they are there. Break your information up into logical chunks and then arrange these chunks into a structure that is likely to make sense to your reader.

Remember that reading on screen is more tiring. Grab your readers' attention by getting straight to the point. Make sure you communicate your main message at the top of the page.

Help your readers scan the page by using sub-headers to divide up each point you make. Work out what headings you will need before you start writing.

## Write your copy

Now you are ready to write your content. Keep it short. Use the writing techniques outlined in this booklet to find out how to cut the waffle from your writing.

Don't write things like 'welcome to the Finance pages, we hope you will find this information useful...' just get to the point. Don't clutter up the pages with lots of background information, just get to the point. Do our customers really care about the context? Probably not, just get to the point.

Don't write long paragraphs. People find these hard to read on screen. If you're listing a set of concepts or processes, use bullet points to make it easier to read. Put the 'carewords' (sparingly) in bold to make them stand out and help users scan the page.

So in order for your reader to get what they want from your web page your content needs to:

- Be short and to the point.
- Contain the words that they are looking for (not necessarily the ones we are used to using).
- Be organised in a way that meets their needs, not ours.
- Fit on the screen without need for scrolling wherever possible.

## After you've published your pages

Promote your pages. Writing good content takes time and effort and so you need to give your audience the best chance to find and use it. By matching your 'carewords' to the words your audience will expect to read you will automatically improve the chance of your pages being found by search engines.

In most Content Management Systems, you'll also be able to fill out a 'keywords' box that search engines can use to find results. Type in the words that your reader may be using to search. These can be the same as the 'carewords' you've used but there may be other relevant words as well.

For example, keywords can be 'fishing licence' and 'rod licence' but you would only use one of these in the content of your page.

**Find out more by speaking to your contact in Corporate Affairs.**

## Maintain your pages

Web users expect information to be fully up to date. They don't expect that from printed publications. If you say that new regulations come into force in June, go back and update the page when it happens. If your pages are about an event that happens in September, delete them after it has happened.

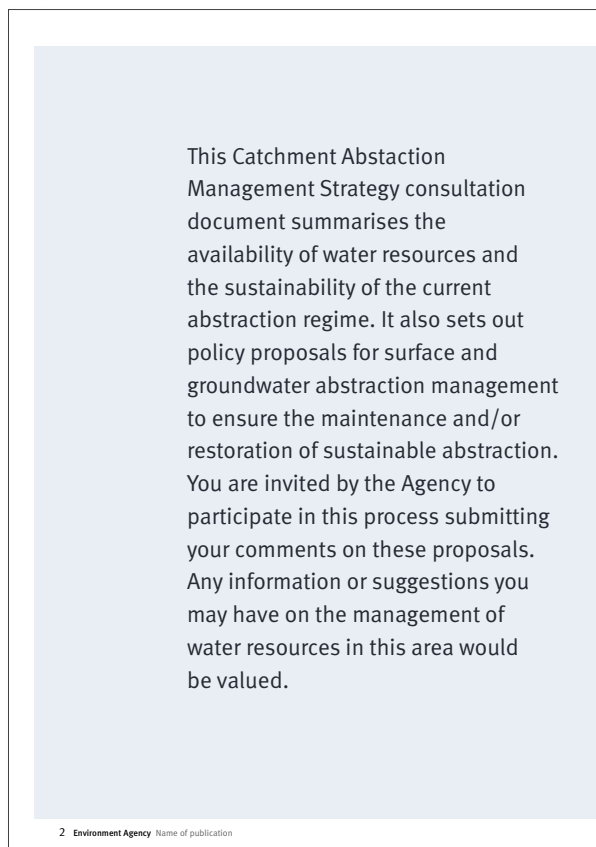
**Make sure you review each of your pages at least every six months.**

# Some examples of how to write for print and online

These examples show examples of text not written with the customer in mind. As before, the ‘after’ versions are not just plain English rewrites, they also address the needs of our customers.

## Consulting with the public.

### Before

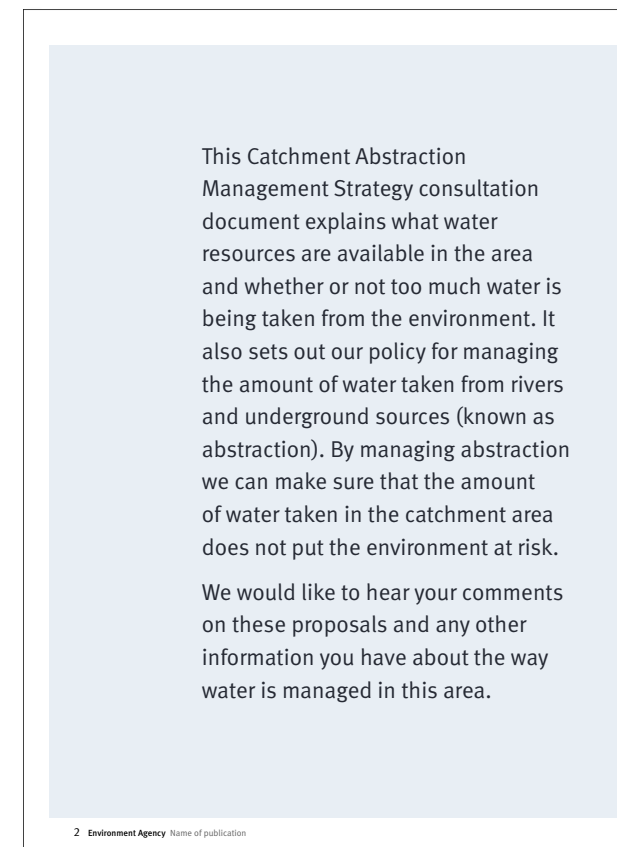


### Why we need to change this

When consulting with the public it is important not to use technical language or jargon that the reader is unlikely to understand, in this case abstraction and sustainable. You should also use the plain English techniques shown earlier in this booklet and write in an active and less formal style.

The version below assumes that the word ‘catchment’ has been explained at the beginning of the document.

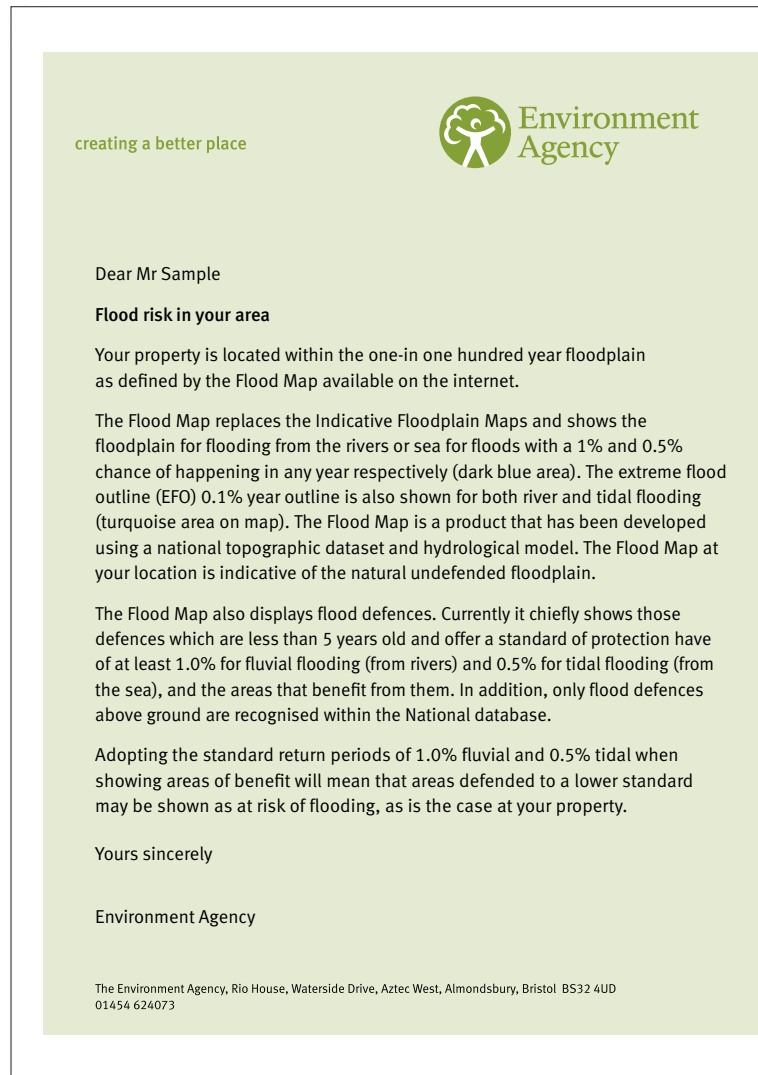
### After



# Writing a letter to a member of the public about technical matters

This example is from a real letter that we sent to a member of the public about the risk of flooding to his home.

## Before



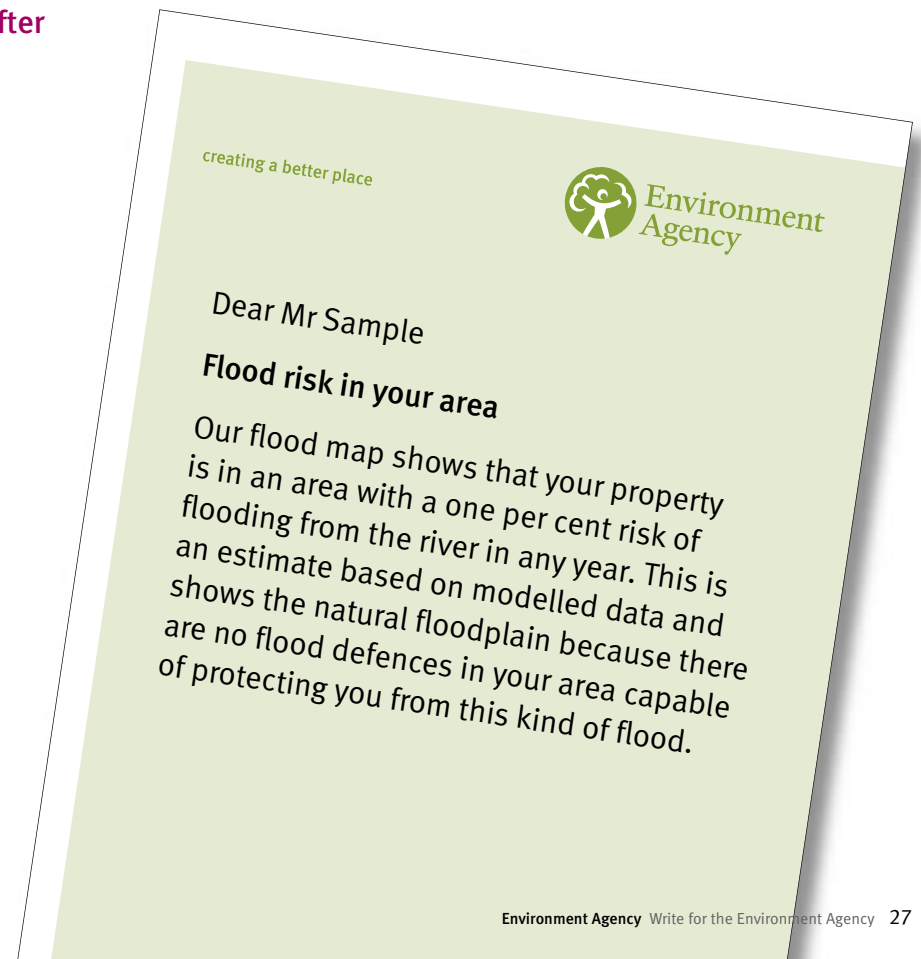
## Why we need to change this

This is far too technical for a letter sent to a member of the public with no background in flood defence or risk analysis. This genuine example is so bad that the recipient referred us to the Ombudsman.

If you need to write a letter like this, try to imagine yourself as our customer. How would you explain this to him if you were talking to him face to face? Would you use all of this technical language then?

You should also adapt any standard information to suit the customer. From his address it is clear that he is only at risk from river flooding, so there is no need to write about flooding from the sea.

## After

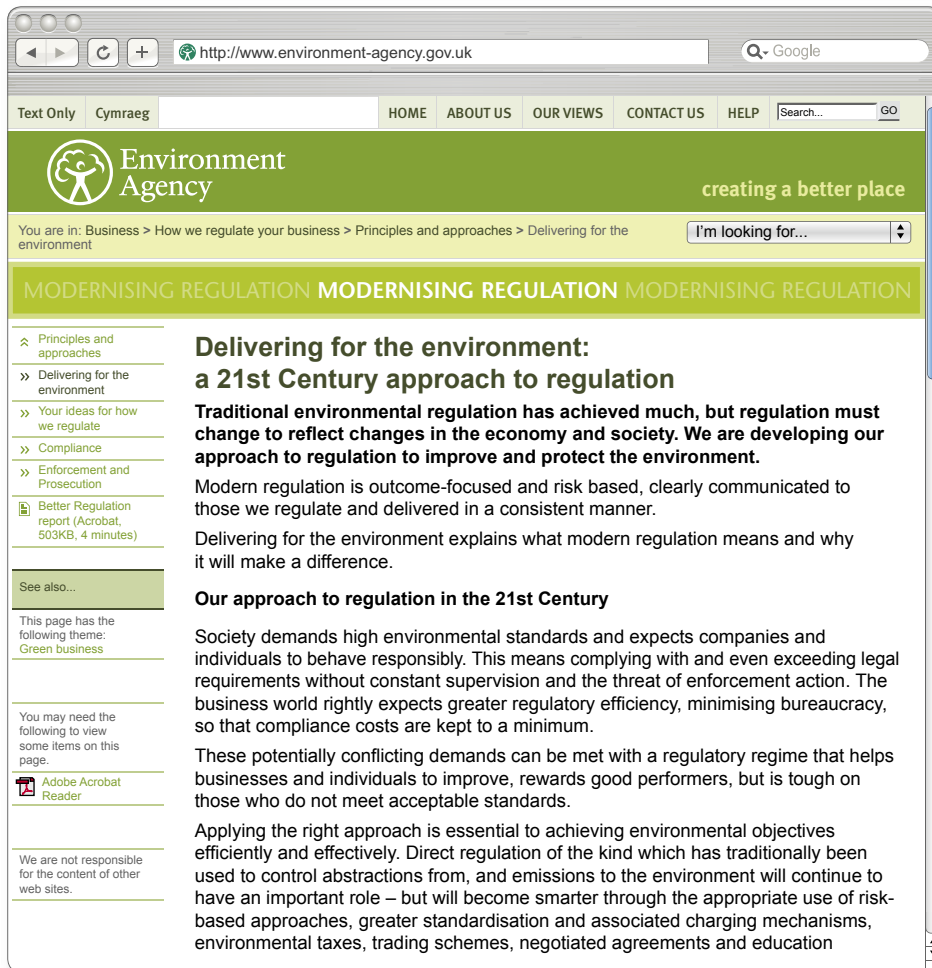




## Writing for users of our website

This example shows the text of our introductory page on modern regulation which intends to explain modern regulation to regulated business.

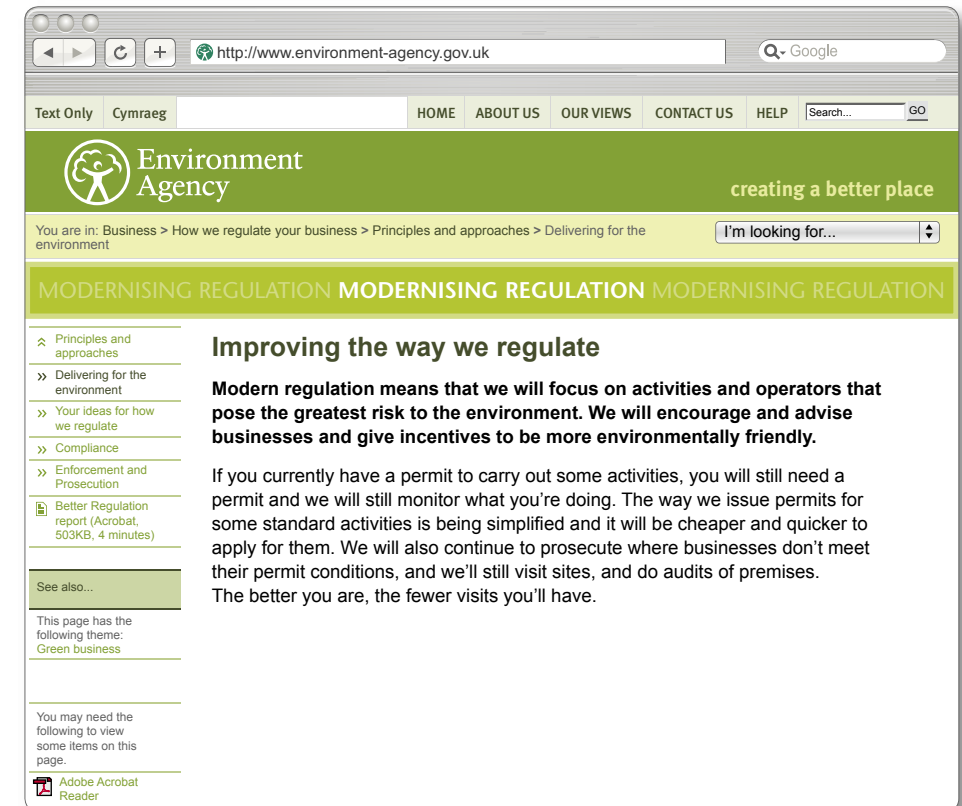
### Before



### Why we need to change this

There's a lot of jargon here like 'risk-based' and 'outcome-focussed'. Most people don't really know what this means. Write more plainly using language people understand, and get to the point quickly. People don't care about why we've decided to do something; they just want to know how it affects them. The 'before' text has probably just been pasted in from a booklet. Don't do this. Pick out the key points and put them up front on your web page.

### After

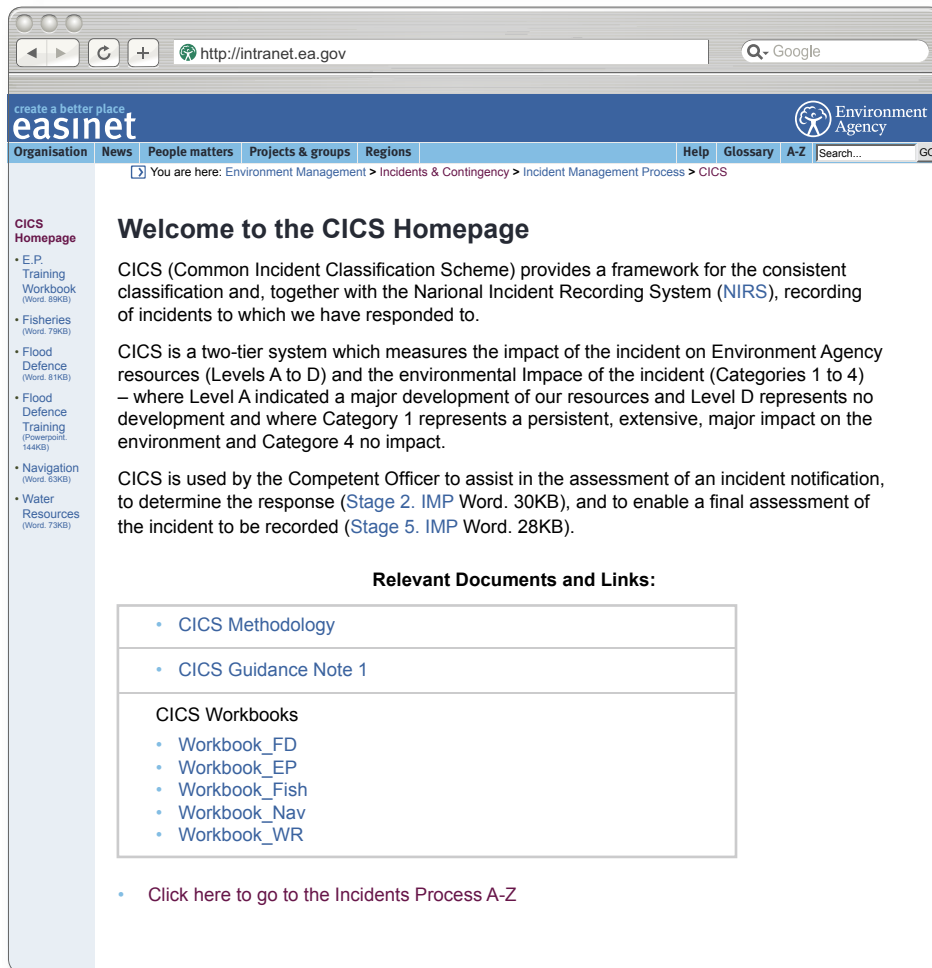


The rewritten version gets to the point and tells our readers all they need to know.

# Writing for your colleagues on our intranet

This is the first page you reach on our intranet when looking for information on the Common Incident Classification Scheme.

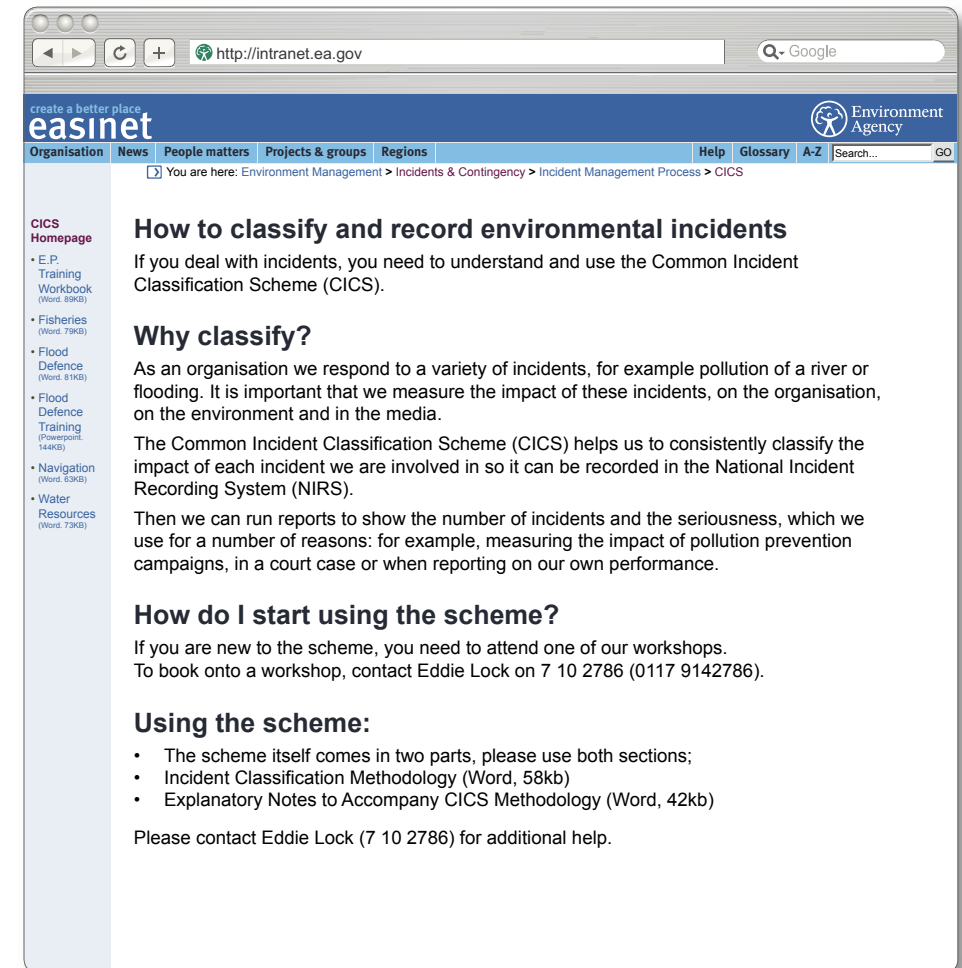
## Before



## Why this has to change

Think about the reader. If they want to use the system do they really want to work their way past all of that background information? More likely they just want to know how to use it quickly and easily. So put that information at the top of the page.

## After



# 'Agency speak'

## Delivering outcomes

As part of government we are exposed to a great deal of jargon coming from central government. In recent years this has mostly revolved around the simple English verb 'deliver' and the noun derived from it, 'delivery'.

There are several legitimate uses of deliver. You can deliver post, a blow, a speech, a baby and so on.

Most recent government uses of 'deliver' are not correct and you should not use them. Even if you see them daily in communications from other parts of government. Here are some recent examples with rewrites.

| Example                        | Rewrite                                       |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Deliver the Defra cuts         | Make the Defra cuts                           |
| Deliver the Corporate Plan     | Achieve the targets set in the Corporate Plan |
| Deliver a service              | Provide a service                             |
| We may not deliver to deadline | We may not meet the deadline                  |
| Deliver the cost reduction     | Make the cost reduction/reduce the cost       |
| Deliver a KPI                  | Achieve the KPI target                        |
| Non-delivery of BAP targets    | Failing to achieve BAP targets                |

Think before you adopt this kind of jargon. And don't use it just because other bits of government do. Always write clearly and plainly.

## More agency speak

Here are some more words that we should do our best to avoid. You may not always agree but you need to remember that you are writing for your readers' benefit, not your own.

| Avoid                 | Use  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Accessible            | Accessible describes physical access, such as making a building accessible to wheelchair users. Do you mean understandable?  |
| Activities            | Activities describes recreational pursuits. Use work instead or reword your sentence.  |
| Add value             | Improve.   |
| (anything) – driven   | Avoid using this term altogether.  |
| (anything) – focused  | Use 'aimed at' or 'for'  |
| (anything) – led      | Based.   |
| Best practice         | An overused cliché. Use 'good examples of'.  |
| Bottom line           | Main point, most important thing.  |
| Causative factors     | Causes.  |
| Challenge             | Is it really a <i>challenge</i> ? Or is it a problem?  |
| Co-ordinate           | Manage, run.   |
| Deliverables          | Results, objectives.   |
| Effective/effectively | Would we ever knowingly do something <i>ineffective</i> ?  |
| Engage (with)         | Another overused cliché. Use involve, talk to.   |
| Enhance               | Improve.   |
| Essential(ly)         | An essential item is one that you can't do without, like 'it is essential for human beings to drink water'. You don't need to say 'this is essentially a guide to writing properly'. |

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Focus                        | This word is overused and becomes a problem when turned into focused or focusing. Try not to use it or try ‘looking mainly at’ or ‘highlighting’. |
| Forward plan                 | Can you produce a backward plan?  |
| Going forward                | From now.   |
| Groundtruthing/groundtesting | Probably means testing.   |
| Holistic                     | All embracing, comprehensive.   |
| Implement/implementation     | We tend to use this word when we mean do, carry out, begin, start or put in place.  |
| Incentivise                  | Not a word. Try expressions like make worthwhile or encourage. You would be better to reword your sentence.                                       |
| Issues around                | Issues are not around, they are about or concerning.  |
| Joined-up                    | Another bit of public sector jargon. Avoid using this altogether.   |
| Key                          | Another overused word. Use main, or most important.   |
| Liaise                       | Contact, be in touch with or talk to  |
| On-going                     | Incomplete, in progress.  |
| On the ground                | Where else would they be?   |
| Organic                      | Only acceptable if you are writing about chemistry or agriculture. Use adaptable or flexible instead.   |
| Output                       | Project-planning jargon that many will not understand. Try product, service or result instead.  |
| Outcome                      | More project-planning jargon. Use result or objective instead.  |
| Proactive                    | Means the same as active.   |
| Proportionate                | Do you really need to use this word?  |
| Relevant                     | Would we ever knowingly do anything <i>irrelevant</i> ?   |
| Remediate/remediation        | Many dictionaries don’t list this word. Use clean up, make safe or fix.   |

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Roadmap                     | A handy publication that shows you how to drive or cycle from one place to another. Anything else is a plan.   |
| Robust                      | Robust only refers to things that you can touch like houses and cars. Processes are not robust. If you need to tell people about how good your processes are then explain why.   |
| Scope out                   | Plan, look at, investigate, check, assess.   |
| Sea change                  | Changing the sea would be quite an achievement. See <i>step change</i> below.  |
| Stakeholder                 | Another overused cliché that implies that we have a misleading equality in our relationships with all of the groups we deal with. Use ‘groups/people we work with’ or ‘people and organisations with an interest in our work’. Or name the groups you are talking about. |
| Strategy                    | Is it really a strategy? More likely that it is a plan.  |
| Step change                 | Avoid using this phrase altogether. Just talk about what the change is and what it means.  |
| Sustainable                 | Only use this word if you <i>really</i> understand what it means and you explain its meaning in your text (not in a glossary).   |
| Synergy                     | Again, most dictionaries do not list this word.  |
| Take appropriate action     | Would we ever knowingly take action that is <i>inappropriate</i> ?   |
| Take forward                | Develop, take charge, start.   |
| Transparent/transparency    | Best left to describe the glass in our windows. Our processes and procedures should be clear.  |
| Utilise                     | Use.   |
| Wash-up session             | Sounds like everyone getting together to do the dishes. Try ‘final meeting’ or ‘debrief’.  |
| With regard to              | About, concerning.   |
| Working in partnership with | Means the same as working with.  |
| Yourself, myself            | You, me.   |

# Questions and answers

## Isn't this just dumbing down?

No. Research with our customers has shown that we frequently send them materials that they cannot understand. This does not just apply to members of the public, but to business, other parts of government and voluntary organisations.

It is an important part of our drive to become easier to do business with that we produce all of our materials with our customers in mind. And that means writing in plain English.

## Where can I get help and advice?

We have a network of plain English champions who can help you. To find out who is yours, look on Easinet or call 7 10 5707.

## I'm working on a partnership document and they keep on putting the jargon back in to the document. What can I do?

If we are the lead partner in the project then our rules should take priority. If not, you should explain to our partners the benefits of our approach to writing and how it will help the project. Ask your plain English champion (see previous answer) for help.

## This is fine for external documents, but there is no need for this internally surely?

We should treat our internal customers the same way as we treat our external ones. This is a diverse organisation with many disciplines, we are not all experts on all of our work. You should assume no specialist knowledge unless you are writing technical documents for a purely technical audience.

Even when people do understand jargon, they would usually prefer to read something written plainly.

## This is all very well but my manager and team don't write plainly!

Managing your colleagues and manager is not easy – some people don't take kindly to being told their writing isn't up to standard. Try asking them what the aim of their writing is, what they want the reader to understand or do as a result of reading it. Try and find a middle way – being dogmatic is unlikely to help. If you change something in your colleague's work, explain why. Or why not have a team *Write for the Environment Agency* workshop!

## Can I really start a sentence with 'and', 'but' and 'because'?

Yes. Because these words are conjunctions (joining words), many people believe that sentences must never start with them. Most good writers ignore this 'rule' believing that if conjunctions are meant to create links they should be allowed to act as connectors between one sentence and another. This is one occasion where your primary school teacher was not right!

## Why should I do this when the stuff that comes through from Head Office/ Region is not written plainly?

Don't put up with bad stuff coming through from elsewhere in the business. If the text in the standard letters you are asked to use is badly or not plainly written let the author of that letter know. Get your plain English champion involved – or the plain English champion for the department that wrote the text. Don't let others get away with it!

## What about plain Welsh?

We have a guide to writing plainly in Welsh, *Ysgrifennu ar gyfer Asiantaeth yr Amgylchedd Cymru*, which is available on Easinet.

## Got a question?

Email Mark Funnell at [mark.funnell@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:mark.funnell@environment-agency.gov.uk) or call 7 10 5707.

# Our style guide

This guide explains our rules on using punctuation and other grammar. You must use this guide when you write anything for the Environment Agency.

## Abbreviations

Do not follow abbreviations, acronyms and contractions with a full stop unless they appear at the end of a sentence.

Write abbreviations in capitals:

**BBC, TUC, PAYE.**

Write acronyms (abbreviations that are pronounced as words) with initial capitals:

**Defra or Aids.**

Use lower case for km, kg, and other measures. Do not follow with a full-stop unless at the end of a sentence. Don't put in a plural – s in the following:

in, min, mm, sec, bu, cu, cwt, g (grams).

Do not contract words like hours to hrs or yards to yds. Nineteenth century, not 19th cent.

The Environment Agency is referred to as 'the Environment Agency' or 'we' and never as 'EA' or 'the Agency'.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

When you first use a title, put the acronym or abbreviation in brackets immediately after it. For example, **Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra)**. From then onwards, use the acronym. If you first use the title as part of a headline, use it in full and then apply the above rule when it first appears in the text. When the acronym is the actual name of something, then put the acronym first:

**The river model QUASAR (Quality simulation along rivers) has demonstrated...**

If you are writing an Executive Summary or Abstract you must explain abbreviations and acronyms in the summary and then again at the start of the main text.

## Apostrophes

There are only two correct uses for apostrophes. The first is to show belonging to or possession 'Jane's book' or 'the previous year's growth' (meaning the growth in the previous year) or 'the previous years' growth' (meaning the growth in more than one year).

The second use is to indicate missing letters or figures as in 'John's late' or 'don't like tea'.

- Do not use it to indicate collective dates. For example 1980s not 1980's.
- Never use an apostrophe to make something plural. Only write 'it's' if it is short for 'it is', as in 'it's a good report'.
- Never use an apostrophe when you are using 'it' as a possessive pronoun, as in 'the dog wagged its tail'.

## Brackets

Use round brackets to mark material that is extra or explains something:

**In the Nant Melyn (a tributary of the River Aman at Cwmgors) actual trout populations are...**

Also use them to refer to numbered items mentioned in the text:

**Changes predicted by the Manchester Model (section 5.6).**

Square brackets show comment or explanation by someone other than the person being quoted:

**'The situation [in flood defence] has never looked better'.**

(If the whole sentence is within brackets, you should put the full stop inside.) This goes for exclamation and questions marks too.



## Bullet points

Use a colon at the end of the sentence introducing bullet points. When bullet points list single words or very short phrases, use no punctuation except a full stop on the last bullet point.

Stem:

- pinky red
- up to 2.5 m tall
- hollow and jointed.

When bullet points list longer points, use a semicolon to separate them. Each bullet point should start with a lower case letter and the final bullet should have a full stop after it.

These include:

- sampling and analysis of the water environment;
- advising customers on pollution prevention;
- operating flood defences in response to emergencies involving main rivers.

There is no need to insert 'and' between the second-to-last and last points. If your bullet points are a sentence each, start with a capital letter and then put a full stop at the end of each sentence. There is an example of this on page 2.

## Capital letters

Use lower case wherever possible.

Only use capitals:

- for names;
- to start a sentence;
- for days of the week and months of the year but not for seasons;
- for titles of books and journals (which should appear in italic font);
- for the particular (such as 'Thames Region') but not for the general ('throughout the regions');
- when you name a geographical area but not when you are talking about direction ('to get to the South West Region travel south west').

## Chemical formulae and technical material

If you are writing a scientific report please refer to the supplementary guide available from our Science Group.

## Semicolons

Generally, semicolons separate two or more clauses that are of more or less equal importance and are linked as a pair or series:

Truth enables man; learning adorns him.

Semicolons divide the simple members of a compound sentence, and a dash may follow the last clause before the general conclusion.

He had a wide range of interests: planning and undertaking strenuous cycle trips in Asia; mountaineering; researching and writing terrifying spy novels – all to his credit.

You can get away without using semicolons, so if you do not know how to use them, don't.

## Colons

Whereas the semicolon links equal or balanced clauses, the colon generally marks a step forward from introduction to main theme.

Use a colon to introduce a list or bullet points, but do not add a dash (:). Do not follow a colon with a capital letter unless your bullet points each form a separate sentence.

## Commas

Insert commas between adjectives preceding and qualifying a noun. For example:

An enterprising, ambitious man.

A cold, damp, badly lit room.

But where the last adjective is in closer relation to the subject than the preceding ones, omit the comma, as:

A little old lady.

Use commas to make your meaning clear. Leaving the third comma out would make this sentence ambiguous:

New shops were opened by Barnes & Noble, French and Collet, Booth and Tucker, and Jones.

Never use a comma to link two sentences:

We will be providing lunch, a vegetarian option will be available.



## Dashes

There are two types of dashes, an en-dash and an em-dash. The en-dash is used to show a span:

*Folios 23-94*, or to specify a period of time by connecting two dates.

Em-dashes are used chiefly to an interruption in the structure of a sentence:

*em-dashes – examples are given in this line – are often used to show that words enclosed between them are to be read as though they were in brackets.*

Em-dashes can also be used to add another idea to the end of a sentence.

## Dates

Write the date in figures and don't use st, rd, th or commas. Put the day before the month and the month before the year:

*Monday 5 January 2005.*

## Fractions

Fractions are written in full and hyphenated when they appear in text:

*Two-thirds of the rivers...*

## Index/glossary

Technical publications must have an index. Words, phrases or acronyms that are part of your everyday vocabulary may well be new to your readers. You must explain them the first time you use them. Separate page reference figures by commas and groups of references by semicolons. Omit the full point at the end of a complete entry.

## Italics

Use italics for titles, including the names of our reports and strategies and for names of periodicals. With regard to periodicals, the prefix the is sometimes printed in italic and sometimes printed in roman. As a rule print it in roman lower case, as the *Daily Telegraph* and *the Daily Express*. (The Times and The Economist being exceptions, as those publications prefer to have it so.)

## Footnotes

A footnote should appear at the bottom of the page and start on the same page as the text reference. One single line note on a page should be centred; two or more single-line notes on a page should be aligned to the left. Footnotes should be numbered from 1 on each page, unless there is special direction to number continuously through chapters or sections. Footnote numbers appear after the full stop.

## Headings and titles

Only use a capital letter for the first word of a heading or title, such as:

*Searching for groundwater.*

## Hyphens

Use:

- where the adverb forms a single concept with the adjective:  
*an ill-educated fellow;*
- where a noun and an adjective are used attributively in combination:  
*a poverty-stricken family; a large-scale map;*

- a noun expressing the action of a verb and adverb takes a hyphen:  
*common-sense; change-over; by-law; bench-mark.*

## Latin

You can use latin names for species of plants and animals. But avoid Latin words and abbreviations in other circumstances.

Use 'for example' and 'such as' and not 'e.g.'. Don't use 'i.e', use 'that is'.

## Numbers/numerical tables

Do not start a sentence with a number. Write numbers one to nine as words and numbers from 10 upwards as figures.

Write thousands as figures in full not using k:

*30,000 not 30k.*

Write millions as:

*one million, 3.6 million.*

When one number immediately follows another it is clearer if you spell out the first number:

*Twelve 25-seater boats.*

Write sums of money in figures:

£75, £5.98, 28p.

Write ordinal numbers in figures:

1st prize, 2nd place.

Decimal numbers lower than one should start with 0 (always use the decimal point):

0.76, not .76

Write combinations like half an inch, half a dozen, without hyphens. If figures in tables under the column heading are linked you should centre them. Otherwise range them left under the heading.

## Percentages

Use the words 'per cent' instead of the % sign except in publications with a great deal of figure work.

## Quotation marks

Use single inverted commas for quotes, except for quotes within quotes which should then have double inverted commas. Any words inserted by the author in a quotation must be set in [ ] to show that they are not part of the quoted matter.

## Question and exclamation marks

Question and exclamation marks act as a full stop at the end of a sentence. Do not add a full stop after these marks.

## Telephone numbers

Do not use brackets around the code. Use a space between the code and the number:

01454 624400.

## Don't forget

- Never refer to 'the Agency'. Always write 'the Environment Agency' or use 'we' or 'us'. Never refer to the Environment Agency in the third person (it or they).
- Always write titles and headings like you would write a sentence. For example, *Spotlight on business: environmental performance in 2006*.
- Always explain abbreviations and acronyms the first time that you use them. For example, we are about to implement the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive. Always write abbreviations in capital letters without full stops. Write acronyms (abbreviations that are pronounced as a word) with a capital letter. For example: Defra, Aids.
- Use the active voice whenever possible.
- Don't use words like investigation, consultation or implementation when you can use the verbs that they are derived from: investigate, consult and implement. For example, write 'we consulted local wildlife groups' instead of 'we conducted a consultation with stakeholders'.
- Write in short sentences. Try to write to an average sentence length of 15-20 words. If you stick to 'one sentence – one idea' you should do this easily.

To find out more go to the plain English pages on Easinet.

You can also contact your plain English champion. You will find a list of them on Easinet.

Corporate Publishing team **7 10 5707**



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