

Fair

Last Updated: 16/11/2020

We treat everyone fairly. It's at the heart of our role as a regulator and employer, and it's why people trust us. So when we write, we use accurate, honest and transparent language.

Be active, not passive

'Your complaint will be investigated' is a passive sentence (it uses the passive voice).

It's not clear who'll be doing the investigating, so it could look like we're trying to hide something.

'We'll investigate your complaint' is easier to understand. It's more transparent. (And it forces you to use 'we', which sounds kinder.)

Research even shows passive sentences are harder to process. So they slow your readers down.

Keep your sentences short

If you've gone over about two lines of A4, go back and see if you can add a full-stop.

People are more likely to understand a shorter sentence than a longer one.

Give a 'why'

If you're explaining a decision you've made, always give the reason.

'Your application wasn't successful on this occasion because you didn't meet all the essential criteria' is much easier to accept than just 'Your application wasn't successful'.

Psychologist Ellen Langer tested the power of the word 'because'. She had people try to break into a queue for a photocopier. Some said 'May I use the xerox machine?', others said 'May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?'

The first group were successful 60 percent of the time. But that shot up to 93 percent for the second group, all because they said 'because'.

Avoid jargon

We don't use corporate-speak like 'going forward' ('in future' is simpler) or internal shorthand like 'legacy cohorts'. It's impersonal and confusing.

Technical terminology, on the other hand, is sometimes fine. By that, we mean specific terms that particular professions use. 'Fitness to practise' is one example.

Use it if you're sure your audience will understand.

Choose words for their precise meaning

Some words have specific meanings for us. Like 'rules', 'standards', 'guidance' and 'advice'.

We also use the word 'must' when we're talking about requirements in our rules and standards, and the word 'should' when we're talking about guidance we produce.

A readability checker gives you a score between 1 and 100, where a higher score means your writing is easier to understand. (As a rough guide, 30 is about the level of the Harvard Law Review, 60 is the BBC website, and 90 is Dr Seuss.)

Aim for 60 or above.

To use the readability checker in Word, tick the 'show readability statistics' box under 'file/options/proofing'. It'll give you a score each time you do a spellcheck.