

# Plain Language, Better Outcomes

write





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A neon sign with the text "Let's be clear" is mounted on a bright green wall. The sign is made of white neon tubing and is arranged in two lines: "Let's" on the top line and "be clear" on the bottom line. The letters are in a simple, rounded, sans-serif font. The sign is illuminated, and the green background is a solid, vibrant color.

Let's  
be clear

Human-centred writing that connects – from the shortest email to the longest project.

# What we'll cover

- Understanding your readers' needs
- Thinking about and planning your writing
- Structuring for your readers
- Writing straightforward sentences
- Using tools to help you

# Homai te pātai

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# Plain language is reader-focused

# Plain language is reader-focused

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily:

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- use that information.

– International Plain Language Federation



write



 Send	To...	All Staff
	Cc...	
	Subject	Parking situation

Hello team

You will have noticed that there has been lots of road works in the area because of the building work that's been happening on the construction site on Greys Road. We know some of you have expressed frustration at the lack of parking options and the road works traffic, not to mention the hazard that the road works is creating for students.


There are now plans to demolish the unused building behind the factory and this will hopefully lead to some more onsite parking for our school, which is great news. The new onsite park will be available from November.

Some of you have been parking on the road in front of the factory next door as there are no signs preventing this and because it is so close to the school, which we understand. However, the city council have decided to officially remove all these parks and put up signs.

We have to let you know that cars parked in front of the factory from now on will receive a \$65 fine. Until the onsite park is ready, we ask you to please park in Smith Street, Lyndhurst Street, or Avon Street. We appreciate your patience on this matter.

Regards

Management

 Send	To...	All Staff
	Cc...	
	Subject	Parking not available outside factory – here's where to park instead

Hello team

### **You can no longer park in front of the factory**

The city council have decided to officially remove all the parks outside the factory and put up signs. Cars parked in front of the factory from now on will receive a \$65 fine.

### **You have three options for places to park**

Until the onsite park is ready, we ask you to please park in:

- Smith Street
- Lyndhurst Street
- Avon Street

We appreciate your patience on this matter.

### **New onsite parking will be available in November**

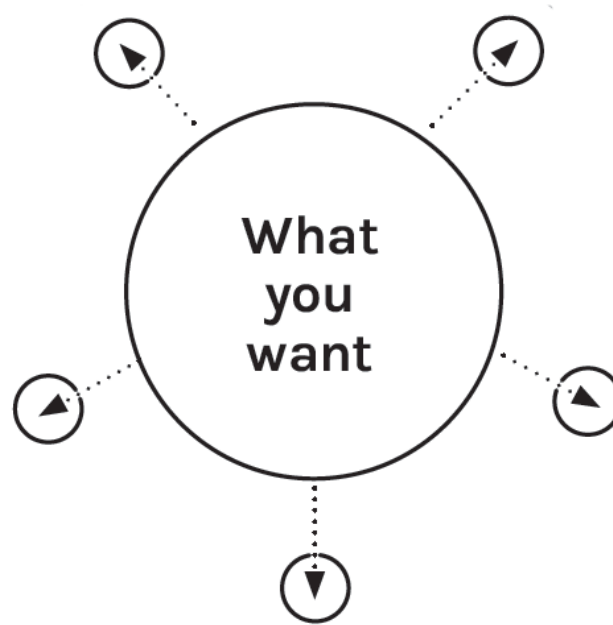
There are now plans to demolish the unused building behind the factory and this will create more onsite parking for our school, which is great news. The new onsite park will be available from November.

Regards

Management

# Brainstorm

As a reader, what do you like to see in business writing?



**Writing is an outcome  
*and* a process**

Make the most of your time

# Reflect on how you use your time

- Think about your writing process
  - what steps do you follow from start to finish?
- How much of the process do you actually spend writing or rewriting?

# A five-step writing process



think  
discuss  
gather



plan  
outline



write  
create



edit  
shape



proofread  
polish



40–50%



25–30%



25–30%

# 1. The Town Planner



## 2. The Architect





# 3. The Builder



# 4. The Inspector



# 5. The Decorator



# Plan with purpose and empathy

# Why are you writing? (purpose)

**To...**

organise

promote

inform



request

update

persuade

recommend

summarise

reply

**write**

so that

# ...something happens (an outcome)

someone knows

something gets  
organised

someone gets  
results

someone acts

people  
understand

you receive  
things

someone approves  
something

someone gets  
answers

Pick something you need to write



# Answer useful planning questions

1. Who am I writing to? What topic am I writing about?
2. Why am I writing?
3. What is my ideal outcome?
4. If my readers forget everything else, what's the one thing I want them to remember?

# Answer useful planning questions

5. How busy are my readers? What projects and priorities might be occupying them at the moment?
6. What do my readers know about this topic? What's their attitude towards it?
7. Why should my readers care about this topic?
8. What main questions could my readers have about this topic and document?

# Reflect on the planning questions

- Are there any questions you don't usually think about *before* you start writing?
- Which questions are the hardest to answer?
- Which questions are the most useful for your planning?

# Activity: consider reader questions

Return to the piece of writing you're working on.

Write three (or more) reader questions.



# Use informative headings

## Changes to Medicine Dispensing – What Will It Mean For You?

Pharmac, the Government's drug buying agency, has decided to change the present system where most medicines are prescribed and dispensed monthly, to one where many medicines on a special list can be dispensed all at once in three-monthly amounts. Some people already receive their medicines this way under the existing rules, but it will be a new process for most people so here's what you need to know:

- The new system begins from October, and Pharmac says doctors and other prescribers will have the final say on whether your health needs would be best served by monthly or three-monthly dispensing.
- To retain monthly dispensing, the prescriber will simply have to sign and endorse the prescription.
- This means older people, or those who might have difficulty managing their medicines without the support of a pharmacist will still be able to have monthly or more frequent dispensings. talk to your doctor and pharmacist about what's best for you.
- While convenience was promoted as a key benefit of the new system, it's important to understand that if some of your medicines aren't on the new three-monthly list they will still need to be collected monthly.
- Some medicines are only partly government funded. If your medicines include some of those, you are currently required to pay for the unsubsidised portion. that won't change, but from October those payments will have to be made 'up front' for the medicines dispensed in three monthly lots instead of the current system where you can make those payments in three, one month instalments.
- The change to three-monthly dispensing will reduce pharmacy revenue from dispensing fees by an average of 30%. A significant number of pharmacies will close or amalgamate to ensure continued viability.
- Some community pharmacies may decide it is necessary to introduce some form of patient charges in order to maintain current service levels. These charges would be modest and would mostly involve recouping the costs of services that are currently supplied 'free' such as home deliveries and faxed prescriptions.
- If you start receiving all or some of your medicines in 3 monthly lots instead of one, there will obviously be far greater amounts to store at home. You need to plan how to do that safely by keeping large quantities of medicine well away from young children and grandchildren. Your pharmacist can advise you on medicine home safety and discuss ways of ensuring the best possible disposal of your unused medicines.

**Your community pharmacist is a key partner in the primary healthcare team who can help you make informed decisions about getting the best from your medicines.**

**Ask your pharmacist for advice about what all at once dispensing will mean for you.**

## Changes to three-monthly medicine dispensing – what will it mean for you?

Pharmac, the government's drug buying agency, has decided to change the system where most medicines are prescribed and dispensed monthly. From October, many medicines will be dispensed all at once in three-monthly amounts.

Some people already receive their medicines this way, but it will be a new process for most people. Here's what you need to know.

### **Not all medicines will change to the three-monthly dispensing**

- Check to see if the medicines you are taking will change to three-monthly dispensing.

### **You can talk to your doctor and pharmacist about what's best for you**

- Some people who might have difficulty managing their medicines in three-monthly amounts will still be able to get their medicine monthly.
- The person who prescribes your medicine will have the final say on whether monthly or three-monthly dispensing is best for you.
- For you to keep getting your medicine monthly, the persons who prescribes your medicine will simply have to sign and endorse the prescription.

### **The way you pay for medicines will change**

- If you are paying a part-change on your medicines each month, from October you will need to pay for the three-month supply all at once.

### **The change will affect pharmacies too**

- The change to three-monthly dispensing means pharmacies will get a lot less money from filling prescriptions. This means a number of pharmacies will close or amalgamate.
- Some community pharmacies may decide they need to pass on some charges to patients. These charges would be small and would probably cover the costs of services that are supplied 'free' at the moment (such as home deliveries and faxed prescriptions).

### **You'll need to store your three-monthly supply of medicine safely**

- Because you'll have extra amounts of medicine at home, you should plan how to store it safely away from young children and grandchildren. Ask your pharmacist for help about ways to store medicine safely.

**Ask your community pharmacist for advice about what three-monthly dispensing will mean for you**

# **A statement heading is a sentence**

You don't need to capitalise every word in a statement heading. It should look like a complete sentence. Try to keep it to 10 words or less. Don't put a full stop at the end.

# Turn your reader questions into statement headings

Q: What's the reasoning behind this recommendation?

Summarise the answer and use it as a heading.

**We base our recommendation on user feedback**



# Activity: answer your reader questions

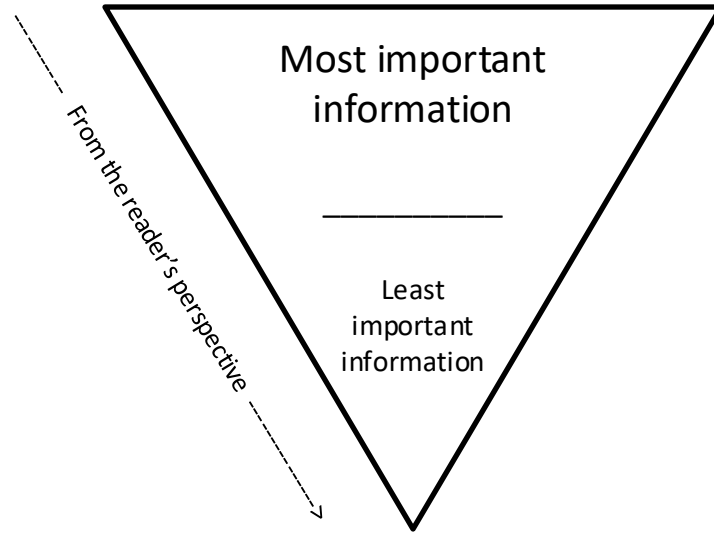
Return to the piece of writing you're working on.

Write answers to your reader questions.



# Create a clear structure

# Inverted pyramid structure p 30



# Reorder these headings by importance

1. We've spent 1.1 million on research and development in 2024
2. In 2025, our funding is being cut by 53%
3. We've seen a 19% increase in user engagement in the last quarter
4. We need approval to seek new donors and funding sources

# MADE structure

## An application of the inverted pyramid

**M**

Give your reader the **main message**. This is the key thing that will grab their attention and tell them why you're writing.

---

**A**

Put the **action** you need them to do (or you will do), and by when. Use strong verbs. Use a list if there's more than one action.

---

**D**

Add any supporting **details** that will help your reader complete the action and convince them it's worth doing. This is the need-to-know information.

---

**E**

Give any **extra information** that might answer your readers' questions or that is useful as reference. This is the nice-to-know information.

# Use your reader questions to structure your doc

Put the questions in the best order — use MADE or the inverted pyramid as a guide.

# Activity: review your document

Use the inverted pyramid or MADE to restructure your document — put the most important parts first.

Is there any content you can remove?



# Use focused paragraphs



# Use topic sentences

Direct referral would require the court to hear and test all the evidence from the applicant and submitters to the application, rather than having many issues resolved at an earlier, less formal hearing. This will be a lot more time-consuming.

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Direct referral will be a lot more time-consuming. The court would be required to hear and test all the evidence from the applicant and submitters to the application, rather than having many issues resolved at an earlier, less formal hearing.

# Break up long paragraphs

An indication of the success of the campaign was the results of a survey of young people at the end of 2021. The survey showed high awareness of the liquor ban from 188 respondents, with 96% percent saying were aware of the ban. There was also a high awareness of the campaign messaging amongst respondents, with 85% saying they were familiar with the bright signage and campaign messaging whether they'd seen it on the street or online. With new students and visitors coming to Wellington every year, there is always a need to be educating and growing awareness of the ban. Anyone new to the city is unlikely to know the exact parameters. Going forward the goal is to be giving the messaging an extra digital push during major events in Wellington that attract out of towners and new students.

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Going forward the goal is to be giving the messaging an extra digital push during major events in Wellington that attract out of towners and new students.

# Write clear sentences



# A great example of what not to do

The receiving Office shall decide whether the applicant has submitted the correction within the applicable time limit under Rule 26.2, and, if the correction has been submitted within that time limit, whether the international application so corrected is or is not to be considered withdrawn, provided that no international application shall be considered withdrawn for lack of compliance with the physical requirements referred to in Rule 11 if it complies with those requirements to the extent necessary for the purpose of reasonably uniform international publication.



# Keep sentences short and focused

What is the best average number of words per sentence?

- a) 15-20 words
- b) 12-15 words
- c) 9-12 words
- d) It depends**

# One idea | One sentence

The tenant may, with the prior written consent of the landlord, which consent shall not be unreasonably withheld, and which consent, if it is to be given, must be given within 14 days of application, assign the lease.

(38 words)

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# One idea | One sentence

The tenant may, with the prior written consent of the landlord, which consent shall not be unreasonably withheld, and which consent, if it is to be given, must be given within 14 days of application, assign the lease.

The tenant may assign the lease with the prior written consent of the landlord. (14 words)

The landlord may not unreasonably withhold consent. (7 words)

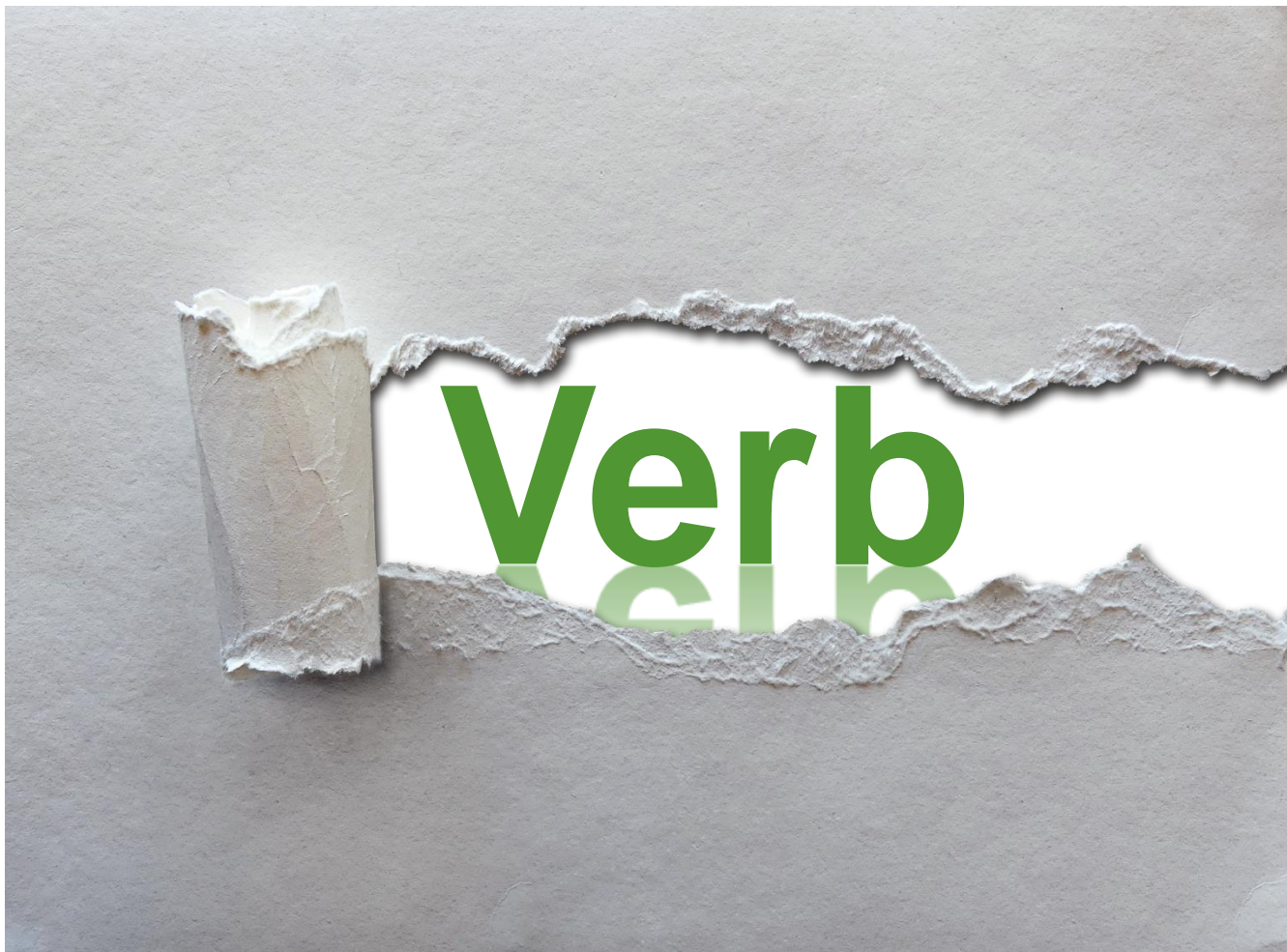
If the landlord gives consent, it must be within 14 days of the tenant's application. (15 words)

# Activity: sentence length

Look for one of your longest sentences and count how many words it has.

How could you chop it up?





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# Find hidden verbs

We will make an adjustment to the process to provide reassurance to the users that we have held a consultation with the manufacturers on the subject of workplace safety.

# Find hidden verbs

We will **adjust** the process to **reassure** the users that we have **consulted** the manufacturers on workplace safety.





# Active and passive

## **Passive**

It is recommended that the paperwork be completed 10 days prior to the work being undertaken.

## **Active**

We recommend that you complete the paperwork 10 days before you do the work.

# Active and passive

## Passive

It **is recommended** that the paperwork **be completed** 10 days prior to the work **being undertaken**.

## Active

We **recommend** that you **complete** the paperwork 10 days before you **do** the work.

# Active and passive

## Passive

It **is recommended** that the paperwork **be completed** 10 days prior to the work **being undertaken**.

## Active

**We recommend** that **you complete** the paperwork 10 days before **you do** the work.

# Active and passive

The manager **wrote** the report.

actor

verb

object

The report **was written** by the manager.

The report **was written** well.

# Active and passive

Brad Pitt wrote the report.

actor

verb

object

The report was written by Brad Pitt.

The report was written poorly.

The instructions were followed carefully by Jo.

Jo carefully followed the instructions.



Mistakes were made.

Spud made mistakes.





A special cake was baked.

Dad baked a special cake.



# The Read Test

## Always read your text aloud

The only way to know how your writing sounds is to read it out loud.

This is always a good idea when writing, for two main reasons:



1. **You'll find out how easy it is to read.**

If the sentences are too long or punctuation marks are in the wrong place, you'll notice. Use this insight to edit and re-draft to improve your reader's experience.

2. **You'll hear how it sounds.**

Our ears can be more reliable than our eyes at noticing repetitive words or sounds. If it doesn't sound good, fix it.

# Artificial Intelligence can help you

# Artificial Intelligence can help you

- Garbage in, garbage out
- Be specific
- A good first draft
- Try the same prompt a few times
- Create personas
- Always edit and review to make it your own

# Proofread last

# Don't paint a wall you might remove

When reviewing — focus on grammar and punctuation last.



# Proofread in stages

- A quick skim
- Mark-up and check
- Comments

Use the right tools for clarity and consistency

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# Use a standard

## The Write Plain Language Standard

To apply the Standard to any document, first:

- list your reader(s) and describe their context and questions

---

---

---

- write the intended or ideal outcomes for this document

---

---

---

Then mark 'Yes' or 'Needs work' against the 10 statements below.

### 'Big Picture' elements

- |   | Yes                   | Needs work            |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. The purpose of the document is clear at the start _____                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. The content supports the purpose of the document _____                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. The structure of the document is clear and logical to the reader _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. The headings signal the key content _____                              | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

### Language elements

- |   |                       |                       |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 5. The paragraphs are mostly short and focused on one topic _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward _____       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7. The words are precise and familiar _____                       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 8. The tone supports the purpose of the document _____            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

### Presentation elements

- |  |                       |                       |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 9. The layout and presentation help the reader absorb the message quickly and easily _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 10. The document is error-free and consistent with your style guide _____                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Use a style guide



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# Check out our free tools

<https://writegroup.io/resources>

# The Write Plain Language Standard

## To apply the Standard to any document, first:

- list your reader(s) and describe their context and questions
- write the intended or ideal outcomes for this document.

## Then mark 'Yes' or 'Needs work' against the 10 statements below.

	Yes	Needs work
<b>'Big Picture' elements</b>		
1. The purpose of the document is clear at the start _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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4. The headings signal the key content _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>Language elements</b>		
5. The paragraphs are mostly short and focused on one topic _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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10. The document is error-free and consistent with your style guide _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Thank you

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