



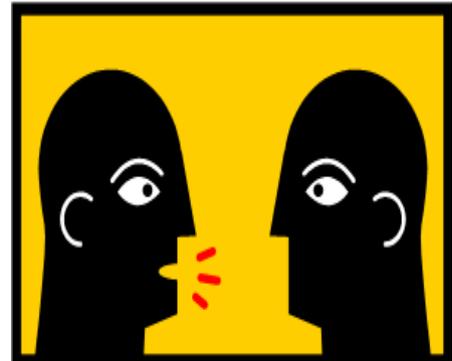
**plain** english

**The importance of clarity in organisational documentation**

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## Say what you mean!!

Person 1 I'm going to have a rhinoplasty  
Person 2 A what?  
Person 1 I'm going to have a rhinoplasty  
Person 2 A what?  
Person 1 I'M GOING TO HAVE A NOSE JOB!!  
Person 2 Well why didn't you say so in the first place??!!



Person 1 You need to fill out Form 232RR in order to guarantee a receipt of funds  
Person 2 A what?  
Person 1 You need to fill out Form 232RR in order to guarantee a receipt of funds  
Person 2 A what?  
Person 1 FILL OUT THIS FORM TO GET YOUR MONEY BACK!  
Person 2 Well why didn't you say so in the first place??!!

Cicero argued, **“When you wish to instruct, be brief; that men's minds take in quickly what you say, learn its lesson, and retain it faithfully. Every word that is unnecessary only pours over the side of a brimming mind.”** Cicero writes that the plain style is not easy. While it may seem close to everyday speech, achieving the effect in formal discourse is a high and difficult art: **“Plainness of style seems easy to imitate at first thought, but when attempted, nothing is more difficult.”**

Source: Wikipedia

## What?

Organisations have made great leaps over the last decade to document their processes and the associated procedures. Today, organisations are brimming with mapped processes and endless procedures yet the alignment of everyday work practises still lag.

The common styles of writing used in documentation create a barrier for people because:

- The information contained is presented in a complicated way
- the style of writing is incompatible with the needs of the user

The great looming challenge now is to demystify business documentation by applying plain language principles and engage the reader with the knowledge in a direct way.

So, effective writing is critical in the context of organisational documentation, especially procedures. This of course is very important in functions such as safety and risk, where instructions need to be clear and accurate.

**Plain English** (sometimes referred to more broadly as plain language) is a generic term for communication in English that emphasises

clarity, brevity, and the avoidance of technical language particularly in relation to official or business communication.

Martin Cutts defines it well:

*"The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a co-operative, motivated person a good chance of understanding it at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood"*

*Martin Cutts, Oxford Guide to Plain English, second edition, 2004.*

The aim is to write in a way that is easily understood by your audience: clear, straightforward, appropriate to their reading skills and knowledge, free of wordiness, cliché and needless jargon.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- it is faster to write;
- it is faster to read; and
- You get your message across more often, more easily and in a friendlier way.

It's vital that you get it right



But generally, we tend to confuse people when we use unnecessary jargon. Let's look at a simple example.

It's not very clear why people write using complicated and obscure words. It is true that many of us have become better educated studying at higher levels. Maybe it's a product of the academic environment; or maybe it's trying to look impressive. This author can admit to you that there was a time when he'd use '*important*' words! Not any longer however.

This is not to suggest that we should 'dumb down' our writing. On the contrary, there are many occasions where we should (indeed must) use appropriate technical language. It suits the context.

#### One way.....

##### Purpose

The purpose of this procedure is to define the requirements for reporting of incidents for ABC Company

##### **A better way!!**

##### What's this procedure about?

It's about what we need to do to make sure incidents are reported.

In the example above, the typical way a procedure starts is changed into everyday language. And it says the same thing! How simple is that?!

## Organisational documents – say what?

One of the drivers of culture is the systems that people work with. These include

- Procedures
- Databases
- Instructions
- Forms

The clarity around these is crucial for an organisation to succeed and engage fully with their workforce. When people are confronted with difficult or hard to understand systems, they invariably will ignore them. **If an organisation puts effort into developing written material that can be accessed by all, it makes a clear statement that it wants to be inclusive of everyone.**

Managers are often at a loss as to why people can't or won't follow simple instructions. Hmmm! Let's take a look at the examples from NSW WorkCover at right.

The 'bad' text is not wrong as far as its content goes. But when it is rewritten (the 'good' text), the clarity is obvious!

### **Bad**

*When compressed air jack hammers are to be employed for the purpose of excavation, it is advisable to make certain that the air compressor is placed within as close a proximity as practicable to the worksite and all equipment is to be fitted with suitable apparatus for noise abatement. Hearing protection is to be worn by all employees at all times and air hoses are to be fitted with snap-on safety couplings which are to be fixed to the hose by the use of safety locking pins.*

### **Good**

When using jack hammers for excavation work:

- a) **place** the compressor as close to the work as possible
- b) **make sure** that the equipment is fitted with noise controls
- c) **wear** hearing protection
- d) **use** snap-on safety couplings on all hoses
- e) **fix** safety couplings with safety locking pins.

*Source: NSW WorkCover Guidelines for Writing Work method Statements in Plain English, 1998.*

### **Bad**

*The trainer will ensure that each crane driver/chaser is fully skilled in lifting procedures and, most importantly, will confirm that each crane driver/chaser fully understands what his duties are.*

### **Good**

Trainers must make sure that crane drivers/chasers:

- a) know correct lifting procedures
- b) fully understand their duties.

*Source: NSW WorkCover Guidelines for Writing Work method Statements in Plain English, 1998.*

## Simple v Complex?

Many of you may be thinking, “Well this is fine, but what about technical documents?”

Fair point. As mentioned above, plain English does not mean dumbing down.

Technical documents have specific content, sometimes quite complex. Yet the fact remains these documents need to be interpreted by someone. If the author wants the information conveyed correctly, then they will need to deconstruct its complexity and make it readable!

We need to remember what the message is! A procedure or technical document is much like a story – it has a beginning, middle and end. If we step out our writing logically, the audience will get a much clearer message.

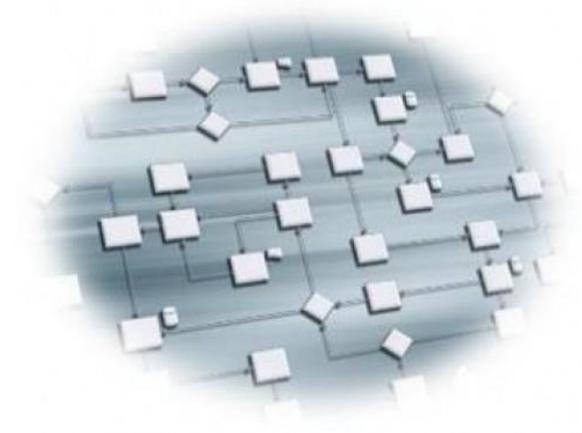
Consider the following. Most procedures one may come across often have a structure like this:

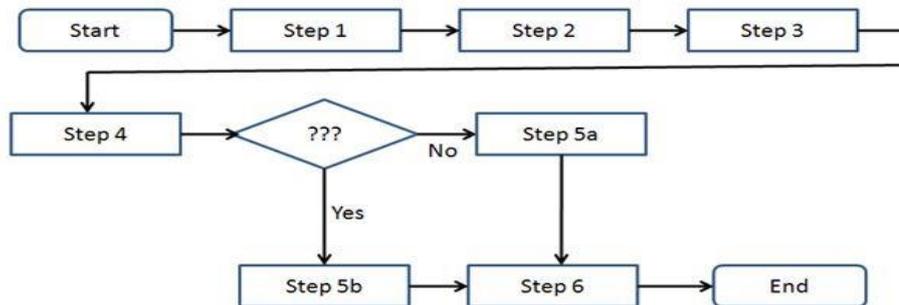
- *Purpose*
- *Scope*
- *Definitions*
- *Responsibilities*

- *Procedure*
- *References*

There are four parts before we actually get to the procedure! While the information under the individual headings may be needed, a person usually just wants to get to step five, the procedure!! So the preceding content needs to be brief and clear, and have a reason to be there.

There is a growing movement among procedure writers to employ *process mapping*. This is where a flowchart process is used. The flowchart of course is pictorial with text, but people often prefer this.





## Language

Many people have the idea that writing has to appear 'technical' and academic-looking. They throw in long words into long sentences, thinking that this is good writing. Many professionals, including lawyers, teachers and academics do this, and often as a result write very badly.

The words we use to convey our ideas must be clear. Remember the example previously where we changed 'Purpose' for 'What's this procedure about?' The latter is clearer to the reader.

Nowhere is the importance of language more important than for people for whom;

- English is a second language, or
- Their literacy levels are limited.

The task for procedure writers then becomes a little harder. You need to look for other solutions, such as pictorial depiction or translations to convey procedural steps.

## The Five Principles of Plain English

### 1. Use an average sentence length of 15-20 words.

- outer-limit of 30 words
- use the odd short sentence: 3-5 words  
now-and-then can add 'punch'
- say only one thing in a sentence
- if in doubt, put a full-stop

A basic rule of thumb: one idea or thought in every sentence. *And* is the word you have to watch.

It has come to our attention that people are not completing their log books on time **and** at the end of each month there is lot of confusion about how many kilometres everyone has travelled **and** this is causing issues with staff.

It has come to our attention that people are not completing their log books on time. At the end of each month there is lot of confusion about how many kilometres everyone has travelled. This is causing issues with staff.

### 2. Use everyday words

- 'despite' instead of 'notwithstanding',  
for example
- the 'would I use this word at home'  
test

### 3. Use first and second personal pronouns

- when referring to your reader and your organisation
- use 'we', 'us' and 'you'
- it relaxes the writing and directly engages the reader
- think of a 'single reader' instead of 'you lot'

The HR department is available for advice on the matter.

**We can give you advice if you need it**

Operations must deliver safety statistics by the end of the month.

**We need operations to send in safety statistics by the end of the month.**

### 4. Use active sentences, not passive ones

- the agent, or 'doer', comes in front of the verb (example - 'the technicians fixed the computer', not 'the computers were fixed by the technicians')
- active verbs keep the sentence short and make the writing more personal, lively and direct

- passive verbs can make writing cold, impersonal, bureaucratic, long-winded and confusing
- passive verbs have their use:
  - When the agent has already been stated or is obvious: 'my car has been stolen'
  - To shift attention to the person or thing acted upon: 'Minister is attacked by dog'
  - To spread responsibility or avoid blame: 'a mistake was made in processing your salary'
  - When an active agent might sound too hostile: 'we will cancel the policy unless you pay the premium'

Your application will be considered shortly.

**We will consider your application shortly.**

The crime was solved by the police.

**The police solved the crime.**

If the Board *holds a meeting* (**meets**) on Friday, it will probably *come to the conclusion* (**conclude**) that the time has come to *take action* (**act**).

### 5. Use verbs and adjectives, not nominalisations (or 'nounisms')

- They create stodgy, dull writing, and conceal the action of the verb. They often end in '-tion', followed by 'of'.

Nominalisation refers to the use of a verb or an adjective as a noun.

## The last word!

*Good writing is like a window pane.*

- George Orwell

Plain English is not meant to be condescending nor overly simple. It does not mean short documents or different meanings. Writing can still be efficient and friendly. You can present complex matters plainly and anyone, with care, can write well.

### Plain English Checklist for your documents

*(Source: Plain English-Good Practice Guide 4, SA Govt)*

- Am I including unnecessary detail?
- Is the information in a logical order?
- Have I used clichés, buzz words, trendy phrases, acronyms or jargon?
- Are my words appropriate to the audience?
- Are my sentences easy to read?
- Have I used active verbs?
- Are my punctuation and grammar correct?
- Have I used 'I' and 'we' and 'you' where possible?

- Have I given instructions directly?
- Have I used positive language?
- Should I use headings or lists to make any part of the document or its structure clearer?
- Is the layout easy to read?
- Is the layout economical to print and copy?
- Am I avoiding answering the question?
- Is my wording unambiguous? Does it say what I mean?

We encourage you to review all your written communication to check for, and eliminate, gobbledygook, meaningless phrases and ponderous text.

#### **And finally....**

*If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.*

OR

**If you have any questions, please phone!**

*By the way, we've included a sample procedure over the page!*

## Planning and Objectives Procedure

<b>About this procedure</b>	This procedure sets out how we plan our OHS activities and set objectives and targets
<b>Why do we need this procedure?</b>	To make sure that <i>ABC Company</i> plans its OHS activities appropriately to meet set objectives
<b>Who does this procedure apply to?</b>	All staff, clients, volunteers and visitors
<b>Where does this procedure apply?</b>	All <i>ABC Company</i> workplaces including off site work

### Key Points

- An OHS Plan (the Plan) needs to be drawn up annually
- Specific objectives and targets need to be set out in the Plan

## PROCEDURE

<i>Developing the Plan</i>	<p>ABC Company will establish an Annual OHS Plan (and budget) to meet agreed objectives and targets. The Plan will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Objectives and Targets.</li><li>• The actions to be undertaken</li><li>• Timeframes for completion</li><li>• Responsibilities for completing assigned actions</li><li>• The current status of each action</li><li>• Resourcing requirements to implement each action (including human and financial)</li><li>• KPI's to measure progress against each action</li></ul>
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The *OHS Management Plan* template sets out the planning requirements. The Plan has distinct sections including:

- Context
- Assessment
- Planning Section
- Implementation
- Verification
- Review

**Objectives &  
Targets**

In setting our ***Objectives*** and ***Targets***, management will talk with employees via forums such as OHS Committees or staff meetings.

Objectives & Targets will include:

- Scheduled Management reviews
- Reduction in Incident / Injuries
- Scheduled employee OHS training
- Scheduled auditing
- Scheduled risk assessments and review of risk registers

Other objectives and targets may be developed and planned as required.

**Monitoring &  
Review**

An annual review of the Plan, its objectives and targets shall be conducted and the review needs to consider the following:

- OHS Monthly Reports
- Incident Reports
- Audit Reports and uncompleted audit actions
- Report of the Corrective and Preventative Action system operation
- Details of public complaints and complaints by employees
- Uncompleted actions from previous reviews

In addition to the above, the review shall address the need for changes to the Management Systems, as a result of changed operating environment or circumstances, and general system improvements.

## Responsibilities

### *Manager 1*

The *Manager* must:

- Ensure that the annual Plan is developed and implemented
- Make sure this procedure is well communicated

### *Team Leaders / Supervisors*

Team Leaders and Supervisors must ensure that:

- Any tasks and activities assigned to them are executed within timeframes

## Review

This procedure will reviewed annually

## Training

The following people need to undertake training in this procedure:

<b>Role</b>	<b>Training Course</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<i>Managers and Team Leaders</i>	Planning & Objectives (this procedure)	Initial and every 3 years

## Tools & Forms

OHS Management Plan

## Flowchart

There is no flowchart associated with this procedure.