

Using plain English

CQC is committed to making its communications accessible and engaging to as many different audiences as possible. To help achieve this, you should write in a simple and direct style, and avoid unfamiliar jargon and unexplained specialist terminology. Although you may need to vary the level of simplicity slightly according to the topic and main target audience, always try to follow the principles of plain English.

Plain English in practice

According to the Plain English Campaign, plain English is “...writing that the intended audience can read, understand and act upon the first time they read it”. Its main characteristics are:

- An average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.
- Relatively short paragraphs (up to five sentences).
- Use of the active voice.
- Using the simplest, shortest words or phrases that will convey an idea/concept/thing adequately.
- Minimum use of jargon.
- Minimum use of acronyms and other abbreviations.
- No unnecessary words or phrases.
- No repetition of information, unless used for emphasis.

Engage the reader

Use pronouns to personalise your communication and to address the reader directly. He or she will then engage more fully with your messages. For example, refer to CQC as “we” (first person plural) after you have introduced the organisation’s name, and use “you” (the second person) apart from when writing in a very formal context. Also:

- Avoid making every sentence almost the same length, as this is monotonous to read.
- Vary the construction of sentences and word patterns, to give your text rhythm.
- Use short sentences (up to 10 words) to emphasise important points or for making statements sound decisive.

Avoid jargon and acronyms

Jargon is language that is created and used by a particular group, and usually only understood fully by that group. The public has difficulty understanding jargon, as do many professional audiences. For example, very few health care or social care professionals will be familiar with all of the jargon that is used in their sectors.

You should avoid using jargon and more general ‘management speak’, particularly in external communications. Also avoid using unfamiliar acronyms and other abbreviations unless the full term occurs very frequently in your text. Even if you spell out the acronym initially, many readers will need to pause to recall its meaning when they come across it, which will interrupt their wider understanding of the text.

Use the active voice

When the verb comes before the subject, the sentence is in the **passive voice**.

Example: “The business plan is being written by Karen.”

(object) (verb) (subject)

When the verb comes after the subject, the sentence is in the **active voice**.

Example: “Karen is writing the business plan.”

(subject) (verb) (object)

The active voice is easier to understand, because it is immediately clear who is doing what. The passive voice emphasises what is being done rather than who is doing it, and sometimes the subject of the verb isn’t even mentioned at all. Example: “It is intended that the new strategy will be developed within six months.”

Aim to make at least 80% of your verbs active. This is particularly important when writing about care services. Compare “All wards must be cleaned very thoroughly by the contractor” (passive) with “The contractor must clean all the wards very thoroughly” (active). The active version emphasises who is responsible for the action needed, making it more direct and powerful.

However, very occasionally the passive voice may be appropriate. For example, when you do not want to identify who is responsible for the action because you are referring to an extremely sensitive situation, or you don’t know who performed the action.

Example: “During the investigation, we were informed that staff were not being trained in the correct procedures”, instead of the active: “During our investigation, the manager informed us that the owner of the care home had not arranged for staff to be trained in the correct procedures”.

Get your message straight

Start by thinking what you want your message to achieve – an action, an improvement in a service’s standards of care, a change of attitude. What do your readers need to know? How will they relate to and understand what you are saying? What style of language do you need to use to engage them successfully? Once you’ve thought your message through, work out how to communicate it logically, clearly and concisely.

Checking and editing

Remember to check all your facts, including names of people and organisations, then check them again! Don’t proofread your work when you are tired, and check a printed copy instead of checking on screen – you will be more likely to notice any errors. If it’s an important communication, ask a colleague to check it as well.