



UOW ADMINISTRATION

Policy and Governance Unit, Academic Registrar's Division

INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO PLAIN ENGLISH

Plain language is clear, intelligible English. It is not simplistic and does not involve any loss of precision (NSW Parliamentary Counsel's Office, Policy Relating to Plain Language).

The use of plain language enables a document to be understood with minimum effort by its users. Plain language increases the effectiveness of communication through logical and practical organisation of material, simple sentence construction, careful choice of words and clear physical layout. The following is a brief guide on how to make your writing clear and effective.

Use common, everyday, respectful words where possible

1. Do not use uncommon or inflated words where simpler words will do, for example:

Change	To
ameliorate	improve
utilise	use
expeditiously	quickly

2. Avoid jargon, e.g. proactive development opportunities, enhanced customer focused service.
3. Avoid archaic words, French and Latin terms and unnecessary technical expressions.

Use Short Sentences

1. Ideally, your average sentence length should be 1.5 lines.
2. Avoid padding to give the impression of depth, e.g. "this is a consideration which we would do well to bear in mind".
3. Delete unnecessary words, for example:

Change	To
the information that we have at our disposal	our information

4. Avoid redundant qualifiers, for example:

Change	To
joint agreement	agreement
major breakthrough	breakthrough
consensus of opinion	consensus

5. Avoid long-winded expressions, for example:

Change	To
at this point in time	now
in the event of	if
in respect of	for, about
in the majority of instances	mostly
prior to	before
subsequent to	after
for the purpose of	to

Use active over passive voice

1. Active voice is clear, direct and accountable language. For example:

Change	To
Lodgement of the form by the claimant is required.	The claimant shall lodge the form.
The provision of a subject outline by subject coordinators to students is mandatory.	Subject coordinators shall provide students with a subject outline.
An understanding by students about ... is necessary.	Students must understand that ...

2. Note that when the active voice is used, your key words are verbs rather than nouns.

Structure Your Document Clearly

1. Break the text into clear, logical sections – this creates a conceptual structure from which the detail can be understood.
2. Place the sections in a logical sequence (e.g. by putting substantive material before procedural, broad principles before the specific, rules before exceptions).
3. Use informative headings that help explain the structure of the document.
4. Remove unnecessary information.

Adopt a User-Friendly Layout

1. Your font, style and font size should comply with the style guide in the Procedure for the Management and Development of UOW Policy.
2. Avoid underlining, italics; blocks of capital letters.
3. Systematically indent subsections and paragraphs within sections so that the hierarchy of the information in the document is clear.
4. Use white space liberally.
5. Consider listing key points or steps.
6. Use navigational aids such as tables of contents, numbered sections.

Woolly language can lead to woolly thinking

In an article in the Higher Education section of the Australian ("Talk the talk and lose the thought", 25 June 2003, p 35), Peter Jones highlights how the use of pre-packed phrases can obscure meaning:

Take any of the following nouns: aspect, role, development challenge, context, stakeholder, opportunity, provision, resource, direction, investment, portfolio ... liaison, function, end-user, process ... Throw in any of the following adjectives: key, crucial, proven, wide, broad, emerging, expanding, international, ongoing, developing, innovative, proactive, strong, strategic ... String together with verbs such as facilitate, deliver, develop, broaden, enhance, support, encourage, coordinate, champion, implement. That's it. You too can soon be talking about "proactive development opportunities facilitating and delivering an ongoing end-user collaboration process".