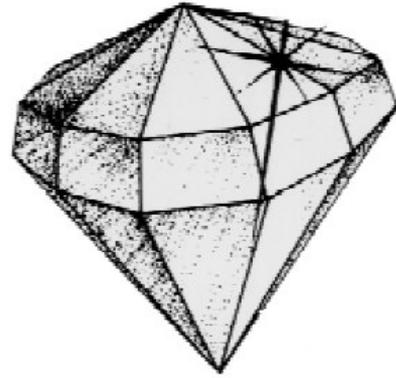


**Plain  
English  
Campaign**



# **How to write medical information in plain English**

## How to write medical information in plain English

### Introduction

This guide gives you an idea of how the plain English approach can make your notices, letters and medical information clearer.

The guide will be useful if you work for:

- the Health Service;
- an NHS Trust; or
- a company in the health sector.

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## Ten tips for clearer writing

These are recommendations, not rules: be flexible!

### **Think of your audience, not yourself.**

Don't try to impress people by using your language to show off: keep it as straightforward as possible. Imagine you are speaking to someone, and write in that more relaxed way.

### **Use short sentences.**

A good average sentence length ('ASL') is 15 to 20 words. Use shorter ones for 'punch'. Longer ones should not have more than three items of information; otherwise they get overloaded, and readers lose track.

### **Be careful with technical language.**

Be prepared to explain any technical language and acronyms - will your audience know them? (See the A to Z.)

### **Use 'active' verbs mainly, not 'passive' ones.**

Using the active is shorter and clearer; using the passive can be longer and sometimes confusing. Try to write 90% in the active. The other 10% - yes, you will find the passive more suitable.

- 'A report will be sent to your doctor.' (passive)
- 'We will send a report to your doctor.' (active)

### **Don't underline.**

It is tempting to do this, but it achieves very little. It can be distracting, making the text harder to read. Proper spacing does the job. And :

### **Use lower case bold for emphasis, not block capitals.**

Block capitals are hard to read, so don't put text in upper case. Use lower case bold. For headings, if need be, use large lower case bold.

### **Put complex information into bullet points.**

Plan and draft your writing. If you have a lot of information to convey, make it easier for the reader by breaking it up into logical 'stepping stones'.

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### Use everyday words.

Big words, foreign phrases, bursts of Latin and so on usually confuse people. Consequently, it is a sine qua non of plain English not to write too polysyllabically! So, for plain English, use everyday words.

### Write small numbers.

In text, write numbers one to nine as words; with 10 and upwards, put the figure. But be flexible. Probably with medicines it is clearer to write 'Take 2 tablets 4 times a day.'

### Use the 'personal touch'.

Any organisation, however grand, can quickly become 'we'. Then the 'customer', 'client' or 'patient' simply becomes 'you'.

- **'An information helpline is also operated by ABC Hospital Trust for the convenience of patients.'**

becomes:

- **'We also operate an information helpline for your convenience.'**

### Online communication/records

Communication between medical professionals and patients has changed, with all official correspondence now available online. This means you need to take more care than ever over how you communicate a medical issue. The results will form a permanent digital record, and will often have to stand alone as an explanation or interpretation of a patient's health. There is no room for error or ambiguity – patients may read the information alone without any further information or re-explanation.

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### Notices

Here is an example of plain English in action.

This notice was put up by a hospital administrator. Over the page is the same notice, but put into plain English.

Dear Colleague

#### RE: CAR PARKING - OUTSIDE WARD 10 AND 11 AREA OF HOSPITAL

It is fully acknowledged that on site car parking is currently very limited and in this respect plans are currently being examined with a view to alleviating the problems.

One current area of concern is the area adjacent to Wards 10 and 11, and during a recent fire alarm call, which fortunately turned out to be a non emergency, the fire vehicles had extreme difficulty in manoeuvring in this area. In the event of a real fire you can rest assured that these vehicles would take whatever steps were necessary to reach their destination as quickly as possible, and therefore it is imperative that the perimeter road around the hospital site is left as clear as is possible. To help us with these problems both members of staff or visitors to the hospital who normally park in that area will now be able to park their vehicles in the Hospital Transport compound between the hours of 8.15 a.m. until 4.00 p.m. The gates of the compound will be left open and I ask that this space is utilised. May I also ask that it is important that no private vehicles remain in the compound after 4.00 p.m., due to the fact that transport Department vehicles will return to the site after that time and need to be in a secure area overnight.

The assistance of everybody in this matter is very much appreciated.

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### For the revised version, we have:

- removed the heading (with its block capitals and underlining);
- put the topic into the first sentence (now 19 words, not 29);
- shortened the sentences in paragraph two;
- used 'active' verbs; and
- put the main instructions in bullet points.

Dear Colleague

We realise that car parking on site is very limited, and we are making plans to solve the problem.

One main difficulty is the area next to wards 10 and 11. During a recent fire alarm call (which turned out not to be an emergency) the fire engines had extreme difficulty getting through this area. In a real fire, they would take whatever action they needed to reach the emergency. So, you must keep the road around this area clear.

To help solve these problems, please:

- park your vehicle in the Hospital transport compound, between 8.15am and 4pm; then
- remove your vehicle by 4pm, as we need the compound overnight for Transport Department vehicles.

Thank you for your co-operation.

### Comments

The revised version is easier to take in because it is more direct.

- The original (ignoring the heading) was much longer: 230 words, with an average sentence length ('ASL') of about 33 words. The second is 119 words, with an ASL of 13 words.
- Passive verbs have become active. For example:
  - 'it is fully acknowledged...' becomes 'we acknowledge (realise)...
  - 'plans are currently being examined...' becomes 'we are making plans...'
- Wordiness has been pruned. For example:
  - the repeating of 'currently' and 'current'
  - 'It is imperative that...' becomes 'you must...'
  - 'due to the fact that...' becomes 'as...'
- 'To help with these problems both members of staff or visitors...' reads as though only two people work there. Remove 'both'

Overall, the second version gives you and your busy colleagues an easier ride. You don't have to fight your way through the words to get to the message.

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### Letters

On the next page is a 'standard letter' sent out by a hospital to patients telling them when they were due to come into hospital.

- If you received this, would you be clear about what was happening? See if you can rewrite it using plain English, so that it answers these questions.
- Is it one appointment or two?
- Would two separate letters be better?
- What is 'pre-assessment'?
- Will having a cough or cold mean I can't come?
- What if I fail to keep the pre-assessment appointment?

### ADMISSION TO HOSPITAL

Dear

The following date for your operation has now been booked:-

CONSULTANT MR SMITH

HOSPITAL NUMBER G 12345

OPERATION DATE 9-11-00

WOMEN'S HEALTH UNIT (Ward 17/18)

Should there be any difficulties regarding the date of your surgery please telephone 76543 Monday-Friday, between 10.00 - 15.00 when someone will be available to take your call.

Your pre-assessment appointment is enclosed. The exact day of your admission will be confirmed at pre-assessment and is most likely to be the day prior to your operation.

We must, however, point out that at this stage we cannot guarantee bed availability. Will you therefore please telephone 76542 a couple of hours before your admission to confirm this arrangement. If you are unable to attend please telephone us as soon as possible to enable us to offer the bed to someone else.

If you develop a cough or cold prior to admission, please contact us as soon as possible.

Please report directly to the ward.

**If you fail to arrive for this admission, you will not automatically be sent another admission date.**

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Yours sincerely

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### Can you do better than this?

You can get help from our website - download 'How to write letters in plainEnglish'.

Or come on the medical writing course to see how you and others would tackle it.

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### Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines

Information about OTC medicines needs to be easy to understand.

Here are some tips, followed by difficult examples from various medicines.

- Use a reasonable type size on bottles and leaflets. Older people especially have trouble with tiny type. Some bottles, where space is tight, have labels that fold out into leaflets.
- Use lower case bold for emphasis, not block capitals. And avoid italics, even though the EU guidelines recommend them!
- Use ordinary words as far as possible. If complex medical words are needed, be prepared to explain them.
- Use 'expiry dates' that are easy to read. Some are stamped so small that people can't find them, let alone make out the date.
- Use plenty of white space, and don't cloud the message with watermarking (pictures faded in under the text).

### Examples

The following is a random selection taken from labels on common painkillers, ear drops and so on. Many people would know some of the language through having spoken to a doctor. But many would find the labelling puzzling or alarming.

(The A-Z of medical terms covers most of the medical words used here.)

- 'These tablets are for oral use...'
- 'Five drops to be instilled...'
- 'Could cause dyspepsia...'
- 'Consult your doctor first if you are already taking medication for fluid retention using diuretics...'
- 'Do not take these tablets if you are already taking another non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAIDs)...'

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- 'More severe reactions may include blood in your vomit or black-looking stools, ulceration, vertigo, myocarditis, oedema, mental confusion, blood dyscrasias (disorders), increased bleeding time and gastro-intestinal irritation.'
- 'This adult nasal spray is for local application in the nose to give symptomatic relief of nasal congestion (including in colds), perennial and allergic rhinitis (including hayfever) and sinusitis.' [30 words]

### (A plainer version)

- 'Use this spray on adults only. It will help relieve stuffed-up nose, inflamed sinuses and hay fever. Spray directly into the nose.'

### And finally...

- 'Do not take this product if your doctor has told you that you have phenylketonuria...'

## A to Z of medical terms

Medical terms or phrases can often baffle your patients or customers. Try to watch out for this, and use ordinary language where possible. Be prepared to explain technical terms if you need to use them. What follows in this A to Z is a selection of words that people may find troublesome. It is not a 'correct' medical dictionary, and it is by no means complete, but it's a start!

<b>A and E</b>	accident and emergency
<b>AID</b>	artificial insemination by a donor
<b>AIDS</b>	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
<b>amnesia</b>	loss of memory
<b>analgesic</b>	something that lessens pain
<b>anastomosing</b>	joining together
<b>aneurysm</b>	a swelling in an artery
<b>antibiotic</b>	a chemical used to inhibit or stop the growth of bacteria
<b>antipyretic</b>	substance that reduces temperature
<b>arthroplasty</b>	repairing a joint (such as a hip replacement)
<b>astigmatism</b>	uneven curvature of the eye that can lead to blurring or lack of focus
<b>atrophy</b>	a wasting away (of tissues, such as muscles)
<b>biopsy</b>	removing a small amount of tissue for examination in the laboratory
<b>booked admissions</b>	allowing patients to arrange with the hospital a date to come in for an operation
<b>bronchoscopy</b>	examining the bronchial tubes with a small flexible camera tube (an endoscope)
<b>biopsy</b>	removing a small amount of tissue for examination in

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	the laboratory
<b>cardiology</b>	study and treatment of the heart
<b>cardiothoracic</b>	to do with the heart and lungs
<b>chemotherapy</b>	treatment (usually of cancer) by drugs
<b>chronic</b>	a long-lasting disease that changes slowly
<b>cirrhosis</b>	progressive disease of the liver (often associated with alcohol abuse)
<b>coeliac</b>	to do with the abdomen (usually the small intestine)
<b>colonoscopy</b>	examining the colon (bowel) with an endoscope
<b>colorectal</b>	to do with the colon and rectum
<b>colposcopy</b>	examining the vagina or cervix with an endoscope
<b>CPM</b>	continuous passive motion: a machine with a motor to help flex limbs
<b>CT scan</b>	computerised tomography is a type of three-dimensional X-ray giving far more information than a normal X-ray
<b>cystoscopy</b>	examining the bladder with an endoscope
<b>D and C</b>	dilation and curettage: widening of the cervix to take a sample scraping of the lining of the womb
<b>dialysis</b>	filtering the blood, cleansing it
<b>discharge</b>	'going home' is more reassuring; keep 'discharge' for running sores!
<b>diuretic</b>	a drug that helps to remove excess water from the body
<b>dysfunction</b>	not working properly
<b>dyspepsia</b>	indigestion; upset stomach
<b>ECT</b>	electroconvulsive (electroshock) treatment
<b>ectopic</b>	outside (ectopic pregnancy; a baby developing outside the womb)
<b>electrocardiogram</b>	a graph showing the electrical activity of the heart, including the heartbeat
<b>electrocardiograph</b>	a machine used to produce an electrocardiogram
<b>embolism</b>	blocking of an artery (by a blood clot or air bubble)
<b>encephalitis</b>	inflammation of the brain
<b>endometriosis</b>	the presence of tissue similar to the lining of the womb at other sites in the pelvis
<b>endoscope</b>	various types of flexible tube with a fibre-optic camera for seeing inside organs
<b>enuresis</b>	bed-wetting
<b>epidural</b>	usually refers to an injection in the lower spine, often given during childbirth to reduce pain
<b>faeces</b>	solid waste from the bowel; motions; stools
<b>femur</b>	thigh bone

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<b>femur</b>	thigh bone
<b>fracture</b>	a broken bone: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 'compound'- with a skin wound</li><li>• 'closed' - without a skin wound</li><li>• 'comminuted'- in many pieces</li></ul>
<b>gastroenterology</b>	study and treatment of the stomach and intestines. The disease is 'gastroenteritis'
<b>GU</b>	genito-urinary (as in 'GU' department); urogenital; to do with reproduction and urination; dealing also with sexually transmitted diseases
<b>gynaecology</b>	study and treatment of the female genital tract, including reproduction
<b>haematology</b>	study of the blood
<b>haemophilia</b>	severe bleeding, without clotting; so, 'haemophiliac': a person with this problem
<b>haemorrhoids</b>	piles
<b>hepatic</b>	to do with the liver; so, hepatitis: liver disease HIV human immunodeficiency virus; can lead to AIDS
<b>ICU</b>	intensive care unit
<b>image intensifier</b>	instant x-ray images on a TV monitor
<b>jaundice</b>	a yellowing of the skin or the whites of the eyes due to liver disease
<b>jugular</b>	of the neck or throat; so, jugular vein
<b>keratic</b>	horny, hardening of the skin
<b>keratitis</b>	inflammation of the cornea of the eye
<b>kidney</b>	organ that filters blood and excretes urine
<b>kymograph</b>	instrument that measures blood pressure
<b>labial</b>	relating to lips
<b>labyrinthitis</b>	inflammation of the inner ear, causing dizziness
<b>lachrymal duct</b>	the channel near the eye that produces tears
<b>lactation</b>	production of milk to breast-feed babies
<b>laparoscopy</b>	examining the abdomen with an endoscope
<b>laryngitis</b>	inflammation of the vocal chords (larynx)
<b>laxative</b>	treatment for constipation
<b>lithotripsy</b>	breaking up kidney or gall stones using ultrasound
<b>mammography</b>	examining the breasts by x-ray
<b>maxillofacial</b>	to do with the face or jaw; (removing a wisdom tooth)
<b>metastasis</b>	the spreading of tumour cells round the body
<b>miscible</b>	able to be mixed with another liquid
<b>MMR</b>	measles, mumps, rubella: the three-in-one vaccination for children

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<b>motor neurone disease</b>	a progressive wasting of the nerves that control your muscles
<b>myocardial infarction</b>	a heart attack; seizure of heart muscle
<b>nasal</b>	to do with the nose
<b>nauseous</b>	feeling like you are going to be sick
<b>necrotic</b>	used to describe dead cells or tissue
<b>neoplasm</b>	new and abnormal growth; tumour
<b>neurology</b>	study of the nervous system
<b>neurophysiology</b>	study of the changes associated with the activity of the nervous system
<b>obstetrics</b>	care and control of pregnancy and childbirth
<b>oedema</b>	swelling caused by fluid
<b>oncology</b>	study and treatment of tumours
<b>ophthalmic</b>	to do with the eye; ophthalmology -• its treatment
<b>orthodontics</b>	dentistry specialising in correcting teeth problems
<b>orthopaedics</b>	treatment of bones and muscles (originally, in children)
<b>osteopathy</b>	treatment by manipulation and massage of muscles and bones
<b>osteoporosis</b>	brittle bones; weakening of the bones
<b>otolaryngology</b>	treatment of diseases of the ear and throat
<b>paediatrics</b>	study and treatment of children and their diseases
<b>palliative care</b>	lessening pain without curing the symptoms
<b>paraplegia</b>	paralysis of the legs
<b>patella</b>	the kneecap
<b>pathology</b>	study of the causes of disease; the testing (biopsy) of tissue to check for disease
<b>pertussis</b>	whooping cough
<b>phenylketonuria</b>	inherited difficulty in processing an amino acid; can lead to learning difficulties (mental handicap)
<b>physiotherapy</b>	use of physical methods to promote healing such as massage, manipulation and exercise
<b>podiatry</b>	a branch of chiropody
<b>post-op</b>	after the operation
<b>post operative</b>	after the operation
<b>pre-assessment</b>	a hospital appointment before the operation date to check details
<b>pre-med</b>	drug given before an anaesthetic to calm the nerves before an operation
<b>prophylactic</b>	something taken to prevent disease
<b>quadriplegia</b>	paralysis of all four limbs
<b>quarantine</b>	isolation of someone with an infectious or contagious

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	disease (originally for 40 days)
<b>quinsy</b>	abscess on or near the tonsils
<b>radiography</b>	taking x-rays; the x-ray department
<b>radiotherapy</b>	using radiation for treatment (especially of cancer)
<b>renal</b>	to do with the kidneys
<b>rhinitis</b>	inflammation in the nose
<b>sigmoidoscopy</b>	examining the inside of the colon (bowel)
<b>sinusitis</b>	inflammation of the sinuses ('tubes'), usually around the nose
<b>sutures</b>	stitches
<b>syndrome</b>	the set of symptoms associated with a particular disease
<b>thrombolysis</b>	dissolving a blood clot
<b>tomogram</b>	the image produced by a computerised tomography (CT) scan, a very detailed three-dimensional X-ray
<b>trachea</b>	the windpipe
<b>trauma</b>	a wound or injury (usually); emotional shock
<b>triage</b>	sorting out patients according to how urgently they need treatment ('A and E')
<b>urethra</b>	'tube' from the bladder, carrying urine
<b>urology</b>	study and treatment of the urine system
<b>venereal disease</b>	'VD'; sexually transmitted disease
<b>ventricle</b>	a cavity or chamber in the heart or brain
<b>xanthoderma</b>	yellowing of the skin
<b>xeroderma</b>	dry skin ('ichthyosis')
<b>yellow fever</b>	mosquito-borne hepatitis, causing jaundice, maybe death