

How we write

Tone and language
Structure and grammar
Style and convention

The Care Inspectorate is a corporate member of the Plain English Campaign. We support its principles and all of our writing should be easy to read and understand.

If there is anything you are not sure of, please get in touch with someone from Communications. The team will be delighted to help you in any way you need, from a quick answer to running a group session on writing and plain English.

You can also refer to Guardian Style if you like – we do. If you would like a copy, please get in touch with Communications.

Tone and language

We want to come across as approachable, easy to understand, personable, helpful. We don't want to appear bureaucratic, distant, aloof, academic. You are writing for an audience, so think about who makes up that audience and what they will understand. Then, read what you have written and ask yourself if they will understand what you have written.

Do people 'use services' or 'experience care'?

We want to promote and support the idea that people using services are empowered and active in the way they engage with care and social work services. We do not refer to 'service users', but to 'people' or, in residential settings, 'residents'. We often use the phrase 'people experiencing care': this includes people using services themselves, and their relatives and carers.

Don't be impersonal, don't be distant

Wherever possible, we say person, people, or people who use services. Avoid saying individual or service user.

Say us and we, rather than the Care Inspectorate.

Email etiquette

Be courteous and professional at all times – not overly familiar or relaxed, but not impersonal or authoritarian either.

Don't overload the system – big file attachments, especially when sent to multiple destinations, clog up the system.

Mind your language

Don't use Latin, French or other non-English words or phrases, not everyone will understand them.

Don't say	You could say
eg	For example
ie	That is
Vis-à-vis	In relation to
Per se	As such
Aide mémoire	Reminder
Via	Through

Acronyms

Don't assume the reader knows what they stand for - spell the words out in full wherever possible. The only exceptions are where the acronym is more commonly used than the words, for example NHS and BBC.

Passive and active

Active sentences are shorter, clearer and to the point. Passive sentences are wordier, take longer to absorb and can be ambiguous.

Write active – be clear about who's doing what.

Good writing should be 80% active.

Microsoft Word can help you check for passive writing.

Passive can be ambiguous:

It is recommended that consideration should be given to the development of exercise routines for people using the service following the recent introduction of gym equipment.

(Who is making this recommendation? Who should consider developing exercise? Who introduced the equipment?)

Active is clear and direct:

The service has recently introduced gym equipment. We recommend they now consider developing exercise routines for people using the service.

Business, professional and technical language and jargon

Words, phrases, abbreviations and acronyms that are common in official and business writing can be unfamiliar, confusing and misunderstood by the outside world.

Always assess whether your audience will understand jargon (and do something about it). You can:

- use it only when you're certain your audience will understand it.
- use it but explain what it means.
- not use it.

Instead of...	how about?
commencement	beginning, start
PVG checks	criminal records checks
tissue viability	soft tissue wounds, pressure ulcers
HIS	Healthcare Improvement Scotland
quality themes	the quality of the areas we focus on when we inspect
driver (for example, policy drivers)	the factors that influence
engage	consult with, work with, meet with
framework	system, way
stakeholders	people with an interest in what we do
resources	money, people, time
risk-based, proportionate and targeted approach to inspection	how we inspect based on what we know about how well or poorly services are performing
pursuant to	following

Structure and grammar

Your writing represents the organisation. We want to be and present ourselves as a professional organisation with an expert workforce. It is really important that your writing is clear and precise, without mistakes. Sloppy punctuation, spelling and grammar, ambiguous meanings and muddled messages reflect poorly on all of us.

Structure your writing

Get to the point and be clear so the reader can understand quickly and easily what you are telling them. Include:

- who
- where
- what
- when
- why
- how.

Sentence length

Aim for an average of 15-20 words.

Easy on the eye

Double spaces after full stops provide a visual clue that helps us finish sentences and start new ones.

Apostrophes

Watch out for incorrect use of apostrophes. For example, you would not insert an apostrophe to show something is plural: CD's, PVG's and memo's are all wrong.

Apostrophes show possession – the apostrophe comes after the whole word, whether it is singular or plural.

One service's policy was good. (The whole word, service, is singular.)

Many services' policies were poor. (The whole word, services, is plural.)

The child's lunch was cold. The children's lunches were cold.

Thursday's meeting. Two days' notice.

Linda Matthews' inspection report was approved OR Brian Thomas's report was approved – with names, it depends how you would say it.

It's and its; who's and whose

A missing letter gets an apostrophe: it is = it's; who is = who's.

Possession gets no apostrophe: The service reviewed its policies; the childminder whose service closed.

Hyphens

Guardian Style has an excellent section on hyphens, which we follow. It is a good mix of correct grammar and common sense. We hyphenate compound adjectives. For example, self-directed support; person-centred; self-assessment; rights-based; risk-based; three-year plan; out-of-hours service; two-year-old child.

Two words become one

Some words come together to form a single word and do not need a hyphen. For example, overarching; overall; wellbeing; childminder; childcare; daycare; subcommittee; ongoing; multidisciplinary. Check a dictionary if you are not sure.

A case in point

Always use sentence case ✓ including in headers; NOT ALL CAPS ✗ And Not Title Case. ✗

The ascenders and descenders in lower case letters give visual clues to help us identify words. Don't use capitals to give emphasis or to convey importance – never capitalise whole words or sentences.

Where to use capitals

Do capitalise:

- the proper names of people, buildings, rivers, places, organisations
- days of the week and months
- Gypsy Traveller, the same as we do a nationality, like Scottish, British, Indian, Chinese, Polish and so on
- the proper names of publications, programmes, projects and plans, such as Getting it Right for Every Child
- the proper names of our structural divisions, such as Finance, Business Support, Registration, Complaints.

Don't capitalise:

- the seasons
- quality themes
- recommendations or requirements
- generic terms or job titles, such as team manager, inspector, strategic inspector, inspection volunteer, locum, sessional inspector, committee, council, single outcome agreement, serious incident review, out-of-hours service, the inspection team, our finance team.

Numbers

Write the word from one to nine and figures from 10.

If you start a sentence with a number, write it out in text and hyphenate all compound numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine.

- Twenty children used the service.
- Twenty-one services were registered.
- Two hundred and twenty-two reports were published.

Bite the bullet

We use two kinds of bulleted list.

- Continuous-sentence list.
- Separate-sentence list.

You can use both kinds within one piece of writing. You don't have to choose just one, but don't mix the elements to end up with a third kind of bulleted list.

For a list that reads as a continuous sentence

We asked what would help make registration easier and suggestions included: **a colon here, because the sentence has not finished yet**

- more communication **each bullet begins with lower case, because the sentence is continuing**
- clearer information **the only full stop appears here, at the end**
- online application forms.

For a list that contains separate sentences

We noted a number of improvements in the service. **a whole sentence, a full stop**

- Children were given healthy snacks. A nutritionist had been commissioned by the service to develop a menu. **three sentences in this bullet**
- Staff were given first aid training. The parents had welcomed this.
- All exits were monitored by CCTV. **each bullet is a sentence, or set of sentences so each bullet begins with a capital and ends with a full stop**

Use S not Z

So, organisation, not organization; realisation, not realization and so on.

Embarrassing clangers

Watch out for common clangers, like 'would of' - it should be 'would have'. And, you can lose money, lose your keys and lose weight, but you can't loose them. You can have loose trousers and loose change.

Write word, wrong place

That should say "Right word, wrong place". Don't rely on Spellcheck.

Watch out for correctly spelled words used in the wrong context, like their, they're and there.

Style and convention

There's not always a right and a wrong way to do things, but our writing needs to be consistent across the organisation, no matter who writes it. To help us achieve this, we have some stylistic conventions for all of us to follow.

Never write CI

Always write Care Inspectorate in full. Never write CI, even if it is just for an internal audience.

Unknown gender

Saying "he or she", and "his or hers" can be quite lengthy. Say "they" and "their".

Date format

23 December 2009 ✓

23rd December 2009 ✗

23/12/09 ✗

And another thing

No ampersands - we write 'and' not '&'.

Our inspection reports – what we found

Our reports are about what we found at a point in time so we write in the past tense and not the present. Things might have changed since our inspection, so we can't say it is happening, just that it did happen. For example, we could write: "the service helped people"; "plans were up to date".

Advice and information

On our intranet: Strategic Development>Communications

Contact Communications: Several members of the team have Plain English Campaign diplomas and extensive experience of copywriting, proofing and editing and can advise you.

On the web

theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a

plainenglish.co.uk

gov.uk/guidance/style-guide/a-to-z-of-gov-uk-style