PLAIN ENGLISH

Use this plain English checklist to audit your writing

'Plain English' explained

It won't surprise you that complex text slows down comprehension. But it might surprise you to learn that the more educated the person – the more specialist their knowledge – the greater their preference for plain English (Trudeau and Cooley 2012).

Plain English means using:
- everyday words
- simple sentences
- direct language.

As well as being faster to read, plain English sounds friendlier and more in keeping with the tone people expect from digital communications.

Developed using writing and design guidelines, this audit checklist gives you a clear step-by-step process for reviewing your content and improving readability. It includes tips for testing readability and a checklist you can use to audit your pages.

What is 'readability'?

Readability is the ease with which text can be *understood* by a reader.

People are busy. Evidence shows that even when writing for an informed audience, using plain English improves the speed at which readers can digest (and therefore act on) information. This is because when reading online, rather than reading word-for-word people scan the screen, skipping words, sentences and whole paragraphs.

Whilst it can be easy to assume knowledge and a shared vocabulary, we need to be particularly wary of Higher Education jargon. Will a 17-year-old easily recall what is meant by 'synoptic modules'?

Wordy complex language slows readers down. And it can cause confusion and frustration. Meaning your audience may well decide to abandon your pages altogether.

Improved readability also ensures more users with disabilities can read and comprehend your content. This is where readability has some cross-over with accessibility. The WCAG 2.0 Guidelines state that content should not exceed a reading level more advanced than lower secondary education (6-8th grade U.S./11-13 years).

So, when writing on behalf of Oxford Brookes, aim for a Plain English style:

- ✓ **Use simple everyday words** and keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words. Stick to one main idea in a sentence.

- ✓ **Avoid jargon** and explain any technical terms you have to use. English may not be the reader's first language so avoid acronyms and colloquialisms.

- ✓ **Address the reader directly** – use the first- and second-person. 'We' instead of 'the University'. 'You' instead of 'the student'. This also helps to shorten sentences.

- ✓ **Use active verbs** as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.

The Brookes style guide offers a definitive guide to writing in plain English; including some plain English alternatives to lengthier words (you'll find examples at the end of this document too).

Checking content is to style

1. **Identify the page(s)** that need an edit – we recommend that you start off with a small selection, say half-a-dozen pages, rather than trying to tackle everything in one go. It could be those pages that are most frequently visited, or those that form a sequence to complete an important task.
2. Run one of the **readability tests** (described below) against the text and make a note of the current grade. On the Brookes website we aim for a reading grade of 8-10 (that's between 12-15 years old).
3. **Create copies of the plain English checklist** (at the back of this document) then read through the copy on your page and **check 'yes', 'no', or 'not applicable'** (N/A).
4. **Note required edits/rewrites** in the 'Notes' column as you go.
5. **Go back to your original text and make your changes.**

How to do a readability test

Readability statistics can act as a useful test for assessing the overall clarity of your copy.

A readability test analyses the number of sentences per paragraph, words per sentence and characters per word. It then tells you what grade reading level a person needs to be able to understand and use the information on a web page.

The Flesch-Kincaid 'reading ease' score is one of the most common readability tests (and built into the MS Word 'Review' feature). The Flesch test rates text on a 100-point scale. The higher the score, the easier it is to understand the content. Aim for **60 or lower** when writing for Brookes.

The Automated Readability Index (ARI) is another popular readability test. This is the one built into the content quality software we use at Brookes: Siteimprove. It's also the test used by Hemingway App a free online tool anyone can use (see below). The ARI test gives a 'grade level' measure (this is the U.S. school grade). Adding 5 to this will give you the average reading age (so if the grade level is shown as 12, the reading age is about 17). When writing for Brookes, aim for an **ARI score of 5-8.**
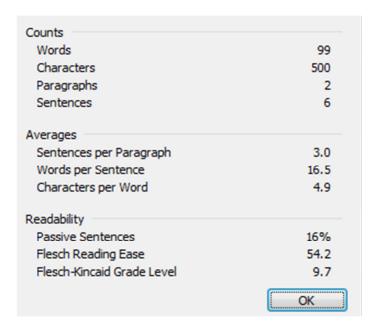
Flesch-Kincaid Reading ease score	ARI	Easily understood by
90.0-100.0	5-6	an average 11-year-old student
60.0-70.0	8-10	13- to 15-year-old students
0.0-30.0	12+	university graduates

Here are the average reading age ratings for some well-known publications:

> Financial Times - 17 year-old
> Daily Telegraph – 15 year-old
> Daily Mail - 13 year-old
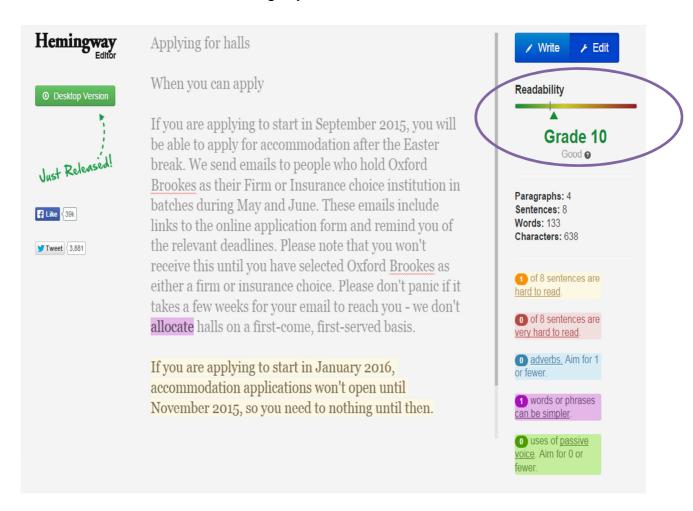> NHS Direct - 10 year-old

Running a readability test in Word – highlight the passage you want to check. Go into: Review – Spelling and Grammar. Word will first proofread your document.

When you click 'Finish' it will display a score summary that looks like the one below:

Tip: don't include bullet point lists in the text you review as this will skew your results.

Running a readability test on an existing web page using your Browser – you can use a free online tool called Hemingway Editor.

To run a test:

1. Go to http://www.hemingwayapp.com/
2. Use the button, top-right, to toggle to 'Write' mode – and paste in your text (I usually do this from a Notepad file)
3. Then toggle to 'Edit' mode

As well as rating your web page, again using the Flesch-Kincaid grade scale, Hemingway also highlights sentences or words that could be replaced with simpler alternatives.

Just because Hemingway flags a word doesn't necessarily mean it should be deleted. It may make sense in that particular context – but it does alert you to words that may slow you're your readers and affect their comprehension.

Plain English checklist

Use the checklist on the next page to find out which plain English guidelines are present and which need addressing on each page.

Once you've carried out the audit a few times you'll find your own writing style will become leaner. You'll easily spot the habits of writing that block comprehension. And you'll find it much easier to edit your own, and others', work to improve clarity.

Plain English checklist

Page title/URL:				

Who is the content for?	Main purpose: what do we want the users to know or be able to do after they have read this?

Language and terminology: What terms will the audience be familiar with?	Is there any jargon we know we should avoid?

Plain English guideline	Yes	No	N/A	Notes
1. **The purpose of the content is clear**. Readers know right away why they should keep reading.				
2. **The most important information appears first**.				
3. **The content is divided into chunks**.				
4. **Headings are descriptive** rather than clever.				
5. **Only the essential information is included**. Extra information is left out.				
6. The **content respects gender, cultural, and other differences**.				
7. **Words are short, simple, and clear**.				
8. **No jargon** – technical terms are defined or left out.				
9. **Acronyms are identified**.				
10. **Sentences are short** – 20 words or less.				
11. **Paragraphs carry only one idea** – within 1-4 sentences.				
12. **The tone is positive**.				
13. **The writing style is active**. "The group decided…" not "A decision was made by the group to.."				
14. **Instructions are presented in the order they should be carried out**.				
15. **Images add to the meaning of the content**.				

Plain English alternatives

Replace…	With…
accompanying	with
additional	extra
applicants	you
at the present time	now
commence	start
concerning	about
as a consequence of	because
delivered by	run by
ensure	make sure
facilitate	make possible
in the near future	soon
on receipt	when we/you get
prior to	before
regarding	about
to date	so far, up to now
with regard to	about
utilise	use

URLs

Readability checker – http://www.hemingwayapp.com/

Misspellings and broken links – http://siteimprove.co.uk/ – if not yet set up for your team, email webdev@brookes.ac.uk to get this set up.

Accessibility checker – http://wave.webaim.org/

PDF accessibility checker – http://accessibility.tingtun.no/en/pdfcheck/