

Section 6

6

Detailed guidance

6A

Adding emphasis

You can use different styles of text or presentation to add emphasis, and make parts of a document stand out. These include bold text, colour, and differing font sizes.

Adding emphasis selectively to key information means you will catch the voter's attention as they read, as they are more likely to see and absorb the most important pieces of information.


How to add emphasis

Use bold text

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• use bold to make individual words or phrases stand out• be selective and make sure that the text that is not in bold is still clear and large enough to be easily legible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• using bold for everything, or for whole blocks of text. Bold text only works when it stands out from the text around it, which will not happen if everything is in bold• using bold for lots of words, which means that none of them stand out• emphasising too much text, as this can make the rest of the information look unimportant, so people will not read it

Use colour

More detailed guidance on how to use colour, and issues of contrast, is available in Section 6D.

 Detailed guidance:
Colour and
contrast
(Section 6D)

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none">use colour to highlight or mark out blocks of text, either by using a coloured background, or coloured text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">using too many different colours

Use different font sizes

You can use different font sizes to help add structure to a document, or create a ‘hierarchy’ of information, e.g. by having headings in a larger size than the body text. This helps the reader navigate through the document as they can easily find the information they are looking for. Using different font sizes also helps to make the document more visually appealing to the reader – a body of text all in a single font size can look like a dense ‘block’ of information and can be off-putting.

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none">use a larger font size than the main body of text for headings, and a larger size again for titles<ul style="list-style-type: none">title (largest)heading (smaller)main body (smallest)use the same font size consistently for the same type of text, i.e. one size for titles, one size for headings, and one size for the body textkeep the font sizes relative to one other so the text looks like it belongs together	<ul style="list-style-type: none">using too many different font sizes – three or four should be adequateusing different font sizes within the same sentence or paragraphmaking information look unimportant by putting it in a font size that is much smaller than the rest of the text

What not to do

Traditional ways of creating emphasis in text can make text more difficult to read and should be avoided. These include:

- Writing whole sentences or blocks of text in CAPITAL LETTERS. Do not use capitals for continuous text
- Underlining text
- *Writing in italics*

6B

Choosing a font

Background

The purpose of writing is to communicate. For communication to be successful, it should be written in way that means the reader can easily read and understand what you have written. You are much more likely to get your message across if your writing looks clear and is accessible, both in terms of presentation and language.

A font is a specific size and style of type (printed characters). Each font has its own characteristics in terms of the size, shape and style of characters it produces and it is important to choose a font that displays characters which are clear and easy to read. This section covers how to choose an appropriate font style.

Criteria to consider

You should aim for maximum clarity and legibility, both for documents that are read close-up, and for notices that need to attract attention and be readable at a distance.

Ideally you should use one font throughout all materials for consistency, so you need to choose one that works well in both smaller and larger sizes.

When you are choosing a font, you should consider the following:

- Choose a font that is clear and distinct when printed in a smaller size for close-up reading or in a larger size for reading at a distance, and in both 'normal' style and bold. Get advice from your organisation's communication team, or your printer or designer, on which fonts are suitable for reproducing in a large size.
- Sans-serif fonts generally work better than serif fonts when enlarged. Sans-serif fonts, such as the one used within this guidance, do not have 'serifs', the small features at the end of strokes. Serif fonts do have these features, e.g. Times New Roman. You should also avoid ornate or decorative fonts.
- Fonts vary in size, even in the same point size. Font point sizes used in this guidance refer to the size of Arial in that point size. If you are using a different font, you may need to use a larger font size to make it equivalent to the specified size in Arial. For example:

This is Arial 12 point.

This is Candara 12 point.

Get professional advice from your printer or your organisation's communication team on the right point size for your font.

- Large documents (e.g. posters and notices) need larger fonts, but just enlarging the point size of a font you would normally use for word-processing does not necessarily work. This is because as the point size increases, the space between the characters (known as 'kerning') increases, and so may not be in proportion, making it less easy to read.
 - Get professional advice from your printer or your communication team on which fonts are suitable for printing in a large size, e.g. for a notice.
 - If you are using Microsoft Word, you can set automatic kerning for your font (go to 'Format', then 'Font', and select the 'Character spacing' tab). This adjusts the spacing automatically to keep it consistent at larger sizes (you can select which sizes it applies to).
 - There is more guidance below on character spacing.

Bilingual materials

The Welsh Language Board has produced a guide to bilingual design, including choosing a suitable font for writing in Welsh, which is available online:

www.byig-wlb.org.uk/english/publications/publications/32.pdf

Distinct characters

For a font to be accessible, it needs to have good character spacing, so that it is easy for the reader to distinguish between similar characters. Test your font spacing by keying the following characters to see if they can be read and distinguished easily from one another:

- Z and 2
- S and 5
- l, I, 1, and ! (l, L, the number one and exclamation mark)
- m and rn
- oa and oo
- cl and d

Also check that numbers are distinct:

- 3, 5 and 8
- 0 and 6

In Wales, ensure the font is suitable for reproducing Welsh text, particularly considering the use of:

- double consonants, e.g. dd
- circumflex accents on consonants

Advice and resources

Ask your printer or designer for advice on text layout and alignment. Other reference materials and advice from professional organisations are available online:

- RNIB's accessible and clear print guidelines:

RNIB (2006) *See it right – Making information accessible for people with sight problems.*

Clear print guidelines:

www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_printdesign.hcsp

- General advice on print accessibility and legibility:

www.lighthouse.org/print_leg.htm

- The Plain English Campaign's guidance on document design and layout, and form design (includes guidance on fonts and typefaces):

www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/designguide.pdf

www.plainenglish.co.uk/formsguide.pdf

6C

Text layout and alignment

Basic rules for layout and alignment of text are covered in Section 3B.



Content and structure
(Section 3B)

More detailed guidance from professional organisations on text alignment, including explanations of what to do and why, is available online:

- RNIB's accessible print guidelines:

RNIB (2006) *See it right – Making information accessible for people with sight problems.*

An overview of this guidance, including a checklist to download, is available on the RNIB website:

www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicWebsite/public_seeitright.hcsp

- The Plain English campaign's guidance on text layout and document design:

www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf

www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/designguide.pdf

- The Welsh Language Board's guide to designing bilingual documents:

www.byig-wlb.org.uk/english/publications/publications/32.pdf

6D

Colour and contrast

Background

When you are thinking about the colour of documents, you need to consider:

- background colour
- text colour
- picture colour (if used)
- the colours of all the documents used together

You should choose your colours carefully, and aim for maximum legibility.

Choosing colours

Colour can be useful, when used well, to differentiate between different types of information, to create emphasis, or to make documents visually appealing.

Do	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• keep your colour scheme simple• use colours consistently across the set of materials• choose colours that can be easily distinguished and have recognisable names (e.g. 'pink' not 'peach', 'yellow' not 'lemon') so that when you are referring to them, people know what you mean	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• using too many different colours• garish colours (e.g. very bright orange)• colours that do not stand out well (see Contrast, below)• using red and green together (as these can look like the same colour for people with colour blindness)• using pale colours on a white background

Generally, dark coloured text on a pale background works best [like this example](#).

Be careful about using 'reverse text', where light coloured text is put on a dark background as shown [in this example](#).

Reverse text can be useful for giving emphasis to a title at the very top of a document, but avoid using it in the body of a document where the rest of the text is dark on a light background. People will often not notice or read the reverse text, as their eye will see a black line, which they will skip over.


More detail on creating emphasis is available in Section 6A.

Contrast

Whether your documents are colour or monochrome, you also need to consider contrast. Contrast is both about colour (how colours look next to each other) and brightness (how light or dark a colour looks against its background).

Checking

A good test of colour and contrast is to print your coloured document in black and white (greyscale on your printer) to see how clear it is.

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Advice and resources

Ask your organisation's communication team for advice on choosing colours, or your printer or designer.

Check whether your own organisation has guidance or policies for communication or writing style, which may also cover issues of accessibility and equal opportunity.

There are some tools on the internet that you might find useful when considering what colours to use (note these are guides, and are not definitive):

- Background information on colour and contrast:
www.lighthouse.org/accessibility/effective-color-contrast/
- Colour contrast 'suitability' tool (designed for web pages, but also useful for printed materials):
www.snook.ca/technical/colour_contrast/colour.html
- General guidance on accessible print, including colour and contrast:
www.informationalternatives.co.uk/clearprint.htm

6E

Writing in plain language

Background

To communicate effectively, you need to write in a way that is easily understood by the reader. People are more likely to read and understand text when it is written clearly and simply.

Voting is universal – the electorate spans a wide range, for example age, nationality, voting experience and language. You should aim for maximum readability, so that your message is understood by the widest possible audience. Writing in plain language will help you do this.

Writing in plain language does not mean 'dumbing down' or being vague or inaccurate – it requires care and skill to get it right. It means using language that people can recognise and understand, and writing in a way that is clear, helpful and engaging.

This section covers how to write in terms of style and language. It is also important to consider how your documents look.

More guidance on font and layout is available in Sections 6B and 6C.

Style

Voters can be easily intimidated or put off by writing that is very formal or sounds officious.

These are some general guidelines you should follow. See the links at the end of this section to detailed guidance from organisations specialising in plain language. In general:


- Use a polite and friendly tone. Do not be overly officious or formal, or use threatening language. If you need to warn people, do so by being factual rather than referring to ‘fraud’ and ‘crime’.
- Be concise. Keep sentences short (an average of 15–20 words). It is fine to vary sentence length as some will need to be longer than others. But try and keep to one main point per sentence, and break up any very long sentences into smaller points, or by using bullets.


For example, in this phrase:

‘...if you do not, your vote will be considered invalid’

the word ‘considered’ could be left out without altering the meaning.

- Cut out repetition and extra words that do not add to the meaning. Try to edit out what you do not need.
- Be direct. Say ‘do this’, ‘write this’, ‘tell us...’ Use ‘please’ in front of the instruction to avoid sounding rude.
- Be approachable: use words like ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘us’, even if they are not technically accurate (for example, if you could be addressing more than one person). This helps the reader to feel like the information is relevant to them, and that there is a person behind the message.
- Say what to do, not what not to do, to avoid confusing the reader.
- Put the option before the action: ‘if you want x, do y’. For example: ‘If you need help, please speak to a member of staff’.

 **Detailed guidance:**
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- Use active verbs where possible, rather than passive verbs. Active verbs are clearer and more direct, and often mean you can write more concisely.

To write active verbs, put the doer before the verb. Think about who or what is performing the action.

Note: some of the words used here are technical terms, and have a different meaning to their everyday use e.g. 'active' and 'passive', 'subject' and 'object'. For a more detailed explanation of their meaning, please see the links at the end of this section.

For example in these sentences, the subject is the Returning Officer, the verb is 'to receive' and the object is the 'ballot paper':

Passive: '...the ballot paper must be received by the Returning Officer...' (10 words)

Active: '...the Returning Officer must receive your ballot paper...' (8 words)

Language and vocabulary

- Use familiar, straightforward, everyday language.
- Use the same way of writing about something every time. For example, if you are giving instructions, write them in the same way on every document. This avoids confusing the voter about whether the information is the same or different.
- Avoid technical and legal terms, and jargon, which would not be understood by someone unfamiliar with elections. Keep terminology consistent throughout all election materials.
- Avoid unfamiliar abbreviations, such as 'PVS' for postal voting statement. Spell out the words in full.
- Think about whether any of the words or phrases used could be ambiguous (e.g. 'Directions for voters' could be guidance, or physical directions). If so, use more specific language instead.
- Use gender-neutral language, avoiding references to 'him' or 'her', 'he' or 'she', which can confuse the voter about who is being referred to. It is fine to use 'they' or 'them' instead, even if you are only referring to one person.

Advice and resources

More detailed advice and guidance from professional organisations on how to write in plain language is available online:

- The Plain English Campaign's guides:
How to write in plain English:
www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/howto.pdf
The A to Z of alternative words:
www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/alternative.pdf
- The Oxford University Press' overview of plain English:
www.askoxford.com/betterwriting/plainenglish/?view=uk
- The Plain Language Commission's guide to plain English words:
www.clearest.co.uk/?id=46
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
– information and guidance on how write readable text and measure readability:
www.niace.org.uk/development-research/readability
- IDeA guidance and advice on using plain English in local government (you need to register with the site to be able to view this, but registration is open to everyone):
www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8021380
- Mencap guidance on accessible communication:
www.mencap.org.uk/displaypagedoc.asp?id=1579

Specifically for lawyers and legal professionals:

- The Plain Language Commission's guide to writing legal language more plainly:
www.clearest.co.uk/files/HowToMakeLawsEasier.pdf
- Clarity, an organisation promoting the use of clear language by the legal profession:
www.clarity-international.net/