

# Plain language style guide for documents





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# Introduction

Information on health and health services helps people protect and improve their health. This information can include appointment letters, written details of services and entitlements and online and printed information on health topics such as being active and eating well. Well prepared letters, leaflets, booklets, forms and other publications are clear and easy to understand. This is important for everyone and is critical for those with literacy difficulties.

Literacy influences people's ability to access information, to navigate services and environment, and to actively participate in managing their health. Research by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)<sup>1</sup> highlighted that over 50% of Irish people would experience difficulty in the current healthcare environment. In addition, the results of the SLAN (2002)<sup>3</sup> survey showed that 17.9% of those interviewed found health information difficult to access and understand. Of those interviewed, 60% believed that better access to health information would help them improve their health.

Older people, ethnic minorities, people for whom English is not their first language as well as those who have not completed their formal education are at greater risk of experiencing difficulties. Research<sup>2</sup> tells us that this group of people also have a greater risk of experiencing ill health and chronic illness. The complex and often stressful nature of the healthcare environment means that anyone can find it difficult to understand. Steps taken to address barriers for people with literacy difficulties have the advantage of improving access and services for all.

## References

- 1 National Adult Literacy Agency (2002) Health Literacy: Policy and Strategy Report
- 2 Department of Health and Children (2002) SLAN Survey

Writing and presenting information in a plain language style is one step to making healthcare accessible and literacy friendly. Confident readers scan a sentence or piece of text, subconsciously processing visual clues such as word shape and punctuation, to determine the text's meaning. Less confident readers read every word and rely on visual clues like capital letters, correct punctuation, text layout and appropriate images to identify groups of words and their meaning. This guide will help you use a range of techniques to present your information in a clear and easy to understand manner for everyone.

The guide has been developed by Health Service Executive Population Health/ Health Promotion and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). The HSE National Communications Unit and Social Inclusion Unit participated in and supported the development of the guide.



## Before you begin

### Knowing where to begin

Before you begin, think about what you want to achieve. Whether you are writing a letter or a leaflet you will have one or more important messages you want to communicate. So, before you put pen to paper – or start typing – take the following steps.

#### Think about your message.

- What is the message?
- Who is it for?



#### Think about your audience.

- Who are they?
- What do they want to know?
- What do you want them to know?
- What is the best way to get the message to them?
- What other languages or other formats (such as audio, CD or large print) are needed to make sure the information is accessible to all your audience?



This process will help you visualise your reader so you can write directly to them. It will also help you decide whether written information is the most effective way of communicating your message. It may be more effective to present your message in another way, for example through pictures or on DVD. You can also use the process to help you identify ways of making sure your information is accessible to everyone you are trying to reach.

## **A note on equality and diversity**

Take account of the diversity in your audience, including:

- gender (male or female);
- marital status, for example married, single or divorced;
- family status, for example widowed or single parent;
- age;
- people with disabilities, for example deaf, vision impaired or physically disabled;
- sexual orientation (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender);
- religion;
- race (national, cultural and ethnic origin); and
- membership of the Traveller Community.

**Do:**

- Write directly to your reader, using personal reference words such as ‘you’ and ‘we’.
- Use pictures and images that show the diversity of your audience.
- Provide information in appropriate languages and formats.

## **Consider funding**

Take some time to answer the following questions.

- Is the information already available within the HSE or from another organisation?  
If so, can you use this?
- Have you secured funding for design and printing or production?
- How will you get the information to the intended person?
- How long is the information needed for?
- Who will review the information to make sure it is correct over time?
- Who will organise and fund reprints and reviews?

## **Reviewing and updating information**

Review all information at least every 18 months to check that it is accurate.

Make sure that changes made to the original publication or letter are also made to the information published in other languages and in other formats such as websites.

## **Useful contacts**

Your local HSE Communications Department can give you further support.



## Writing guidelines

### Abbreviations and acronyms

An abbreviation is the short version of a word (or words).

An acronym is formed from the first letter or letters from a series of words.

- Avoid writing abbreviations or acronyms with full stops or spaces between the letters.
- Use acronyms sparingly, generally only if:
  - they are more familiar to the audience than the full words or term they represent (for example laser, CD) or
  - you plan to use particular term several times in a document and the acronym is more convenient.
- The first time you use an acronym, write the full version as well. The short-hand you use in your work may be completely unfamiliar to the person reading your document.

Type of word	Instead of	Write
Abbreviation	Mr., Mrs., Dr., Prof., a.m., p.m.	Mr, Mrs, Dr, Prof, am, pm
Acronym	D.N.A., E.U., H.S.E., I.C.U	DNA, EU, HSE, ICU

#### How to use an acronym in a sentence

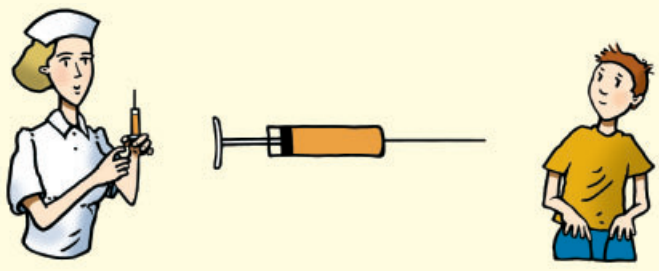
High density lipoprotein (HDL) is a form of good cholesterol.



# Active verbs

Use active verbs as much as possible – put the subject ('doer') before the verb.

<b>Instead of (passive)</b>	Object	verb	doer
	'Your <b>child</b> can be <b>vaccinated</b> by the <b>nurse</b> ...'		
<b>Write (active)</b>	Doer	verb	object
	The <b>nurse</b> can <b>vaccinate</b> your <b>child</b>		



Passive	Active
The completed form should be sent to your local health office	'[You should] Send the completed form to your local health office ...'

Putting in the 'doer' as you read the sentence out loud will help you decide whether you have used an active or passive verb.

# Addresses

Write addresses as they would appear on an envelope and leave out punctuation.

## Example

HSE Head Office  
Oak House  
Millennium Park  
Naas  
Co. Kildare

If you must write an address on one line, include punctuation.

## Example

Write to HSE Head Office, Oak House, Millennium Park, Naas, Co. Kildare.

## Being concise

Cut out unnecessary words, which add to the length of sentences without adding meaning. Remove unnecessary introductions to sentences.

Instead of		Write
adequate number of	➔	enough
by means of	➔	by
during such time	➔	while
excessive number of	➔	too many
in excess of	➔	more than (over)
in reference to	➔	about
in respect of	➔	for
with regard to	➔	about
in the event that	➔	if
in view of the fact	➔	because
it would appear that	➔	apparently
notwithstanding the fact that	➔	although
on the part of	➔	by
subsequent to	➔	after
under the provisions of	➔	under
until such time	➔	until
with a view to	➔	to

## Being personal

Use 'I', 'we' and 'you' in your writing as much as possible – this will also help you to imagine your reader.

Instead of		Write
applicant; patient; recipient; client; the person receiving...	➔	You
the HSE	➔	We
The HSE's...	➔	Our
[treatment] is given...; [treatment] is available	➔	you (they) may get [treatment]...
...will be issued	➔	you will get..., we (they) will send...

# Capital letters

- Use these:
  - at the start of a sentence,
  - at the start of proper nouns (names of particular places, people or things), and
  - at the start of job titles only when the title appears with a person's name.
- Don't write full words in capitals. Block capitals distort the shape of words, making them more difficult to read.

## Medical terms

Use capital letters only if a condition is named after a person or is known by its Latin name.

	When to start with a <b>capital</b> letter	When to use a <b>lower case</b> letter
<b>Places, things</b>	Ballymun Health Centre Health Service Executive Area	local health clinic committee staff team consent form
<b>Conditions</b>	Crohn's disease Down's syndrome Staphylococcus aureus	measles thrombosis chlamydia diabetes
<b>Titles</b>	Jane Murphy, Public Health Nurse Martin Smith, Health Promotion Officer	The consultant is available until 3pm. The general practice nurse will help.

# Dates

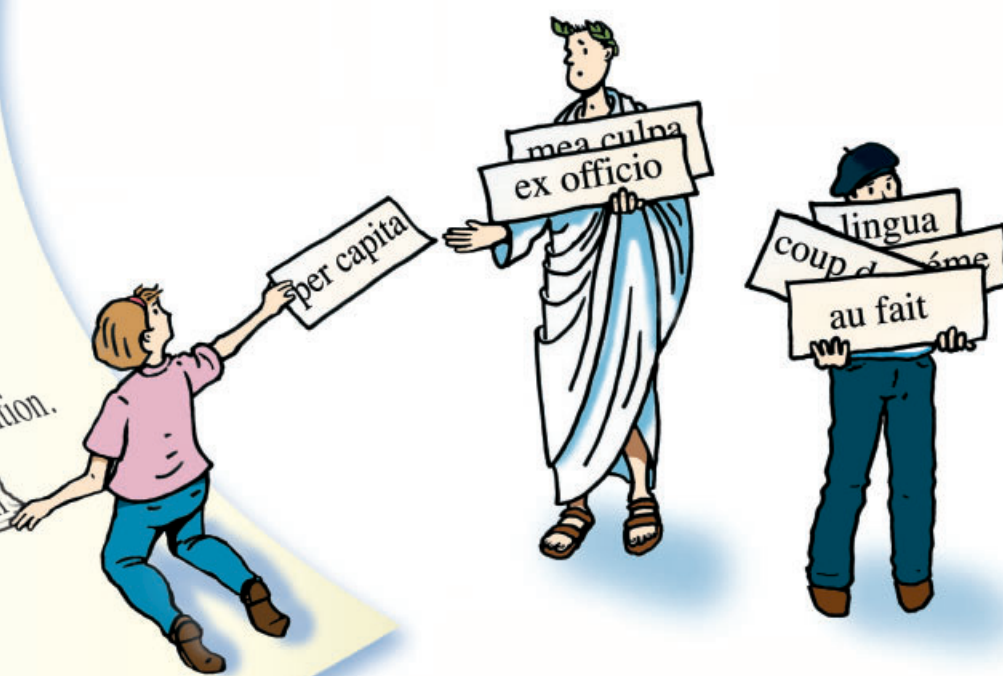
Write in date, month and year format without any commas.

When referring to decades, leave out apostrophes.

Instead of	Write
29th September, 2004	→ 29 September 2004
1960's	→ 1960s



number of  
t to his friend  
ork for the,  
e engaged in,  
were fully informed,  
and by his right of position.  
and for each person.



## Everyday words

- Replace Latin or French terms with the same term in English where possible.

### Example

Instead of **au fait** use **familiar with**

- Define essential specialist terms the first time you use them.

### Example

A laparoscopy is where a small cut is made so that an instrument with a camera can view the inside of the body.

- Replace complicated words and phrases with plainer alternatives.

Instead of		Write
analgesic	➔	painkiller
commence	➔	start, begin
hypertension	➔	high blood pressure
quarterly	➔	every three months
sufficient	➔	enough
resident in	➔	living in

## Gender

- As much as possible, write directly to the reader using personal reference words such as 'you' and 'we'.
- If you must write about third parties, for example if writing to parents about child safety, try to refer to a child as 'your child' and 'they' instead of 'he/she'. Following from this, use 'them' instead of 'him/her' and 'their' instead of 'his/her'.

### Example

Playing music for your child may help them get to sleep.

If a child is crying, it could mean they are hungry or tired or that their nappy is dirty.

- If you would prefer not to use 'they', 'them' or 'their', you may use either 'he' or 'she'. If you do this, include a note at the start to explain what 'he' or 'she' is intended to cover.

### Example

Throughout this booklet we refer to your baby as she.

Playing music to your child may help her get to sleep.

## Greetings in letters

- If you know the name of the reader, write 'Dear X', 'Dear Mr X', 'Dear Ms X' or whatever other title you know applies to the reader. End your letter with 'Yours sincerely'.
- If you don't know the name of the person to whom you are writing, write 'Dear Sir' or 'Dear Madam'. End your letter with 'Yours faithfully'.
- Do not insert full stops after the person's title.

## Latin abbreviations

- Write out 'e.g.' as 'for example'.
- Write out 'i.e.' as 'that is'.
- Do not use 'etc.' at the end of sentences. Instead, replace it with 'and so on' or reorder your sentence.

### Instead of

We have guides, leaflets, reports etc.



### Write

We have leaflets, guides, reports and so on.

**or**

Our publications include leaflets, guides and reports.

# Lists and bullet points

- Keep lists to a maximum of eight points.
- Start and end a list on the same page.
- Make sure each item follows logically from the introduction to the list.
- Only number the items in a list if the list is identifying a series of steps in a process.



Examples of layout and punctuation for different lists are given on page 12 to 14.



- **If a list is longer than eight points:**
  - use sub-headings to break it down into smaller lists.

## Example

Reduce the risk of cot death

### **Always put your baby to sleep on their back**

- Place your baby's feet to the foot of the cot.
- Keep your baby's head and shoulders above the blanket.
- Do not use a pillow in your baby's cot.

### **Do not let your baby get too hot or too cold**

- Keep the room temperature at 18°C (65°F).
- Dress your baby for bed in a nappy, vest and babygro. In hot weather your baby will need less clothes.
- Use light layers of blankets. Do not use a duvet.
- Check how warm your baby is by feeling their tummy. It should feel warm, not hot. If your baby is sweating, they are too hot.

### ● **If a list is a continuous sentence:**

- end the introduction to the list with a colon (as in this list),
- start each item in the list with a small letter,
- separate the items with a comma if they are all quite short,
- separate the items with a semi-colon if some items are long,
- include 'or' or 'and' after the second last item, and
- end the list with a full stop.

#### Example

##### **A list where each item ends with a comma**

The information pack *Caring for Your Baby: Six Months to Two Years Old* discusses the extra support offered by:

- public health nurses,
- the Family Support Agency,
- family resource centres,
- Barnardos, and
- social work departments.

#### Example

##### **A list where each item ends with a semi-colon**

To have a healthy vegetarian diet your child needs:

- pulses, such as peas, lentils and beans;
- milk and milk products, such as yoghurt and cheese;
- eggs;
- healthy soya foods, such as hummus or tofu; and
- quorn, which is a source of protein that can be used instead of meat.

### ● **If a list is a series of full sentences:**

- end the introduction to the list with a full stop if it is also a full sentence or with no punctuation if it is a heading (see examples),
- start each item with a capital letter, and
- end each item with a full stop.

#### Example

##### **A list where the introduction and each item is a full sentence**

How can I help my child if they wake up at night with a nightmare?

- Hold and comfort your child when they wake from a nightmare.
- If your child is too upset to be left alone, sit or lie with them until they go back to sleep.
- Leave their bedroom door and your's open so they know you are near.

## Example

### **A list where the introduction is a heading and each item is a full sentence**

How to help your child if they wake up at night with a nightmare

- Hold and comfort your child when they wake from a nightmare.
- If your child is too upset to be left alone, sit or lie with them until they go back to sleep.

### ● **If a list is introduced by a heading and is a series of phrases:**

- do not use any punctuation after the heading,
- start each item with a capital letter, and
- leave out any punctuation at the end.

## Example

Other sources of fatty acids

- Meat, poultry and eggs
- Seeds such as sunflower, safflower, pumpkin and sesame
- Vegetables
- Wholegrain breads and breakfast cereals

### ● **If a list identifies a sequence:**

- use numbers instead of bullet points,
- end the introduction to the list with a full stop if it is a full sentence or with no punctuation if it is a heading,
- start each item with a capital letter, and
- end each item with a full stop.

## Example

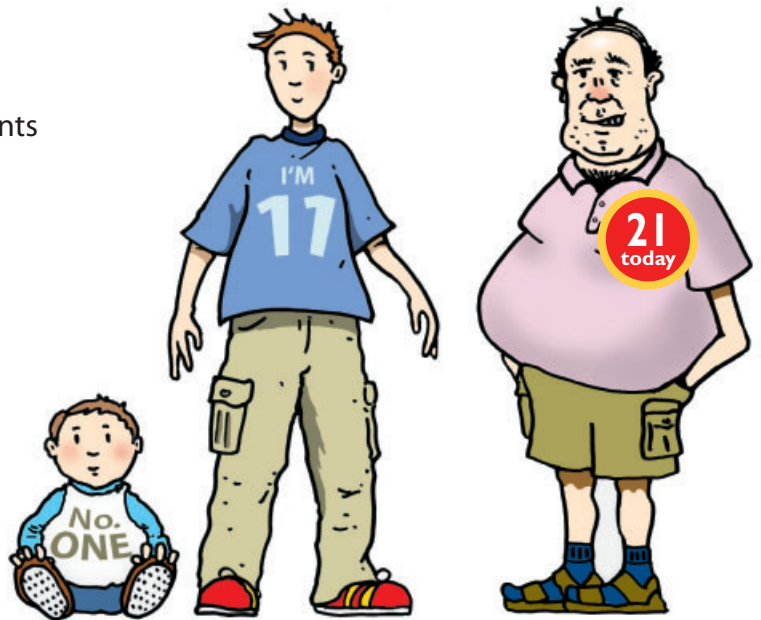
### **How to make sure your hands are clean**

1. Wet your hands under running water.
2. Lather with soap.
3. Cover all parts of your hands.
4. Rinse well under running water.
5. Dry thoroughly.



# Numbers

- Use digits when referring to measurements such as portions, doses, ages and so on.
- Otherwise, write out the numbers one to nine and use digits for number 10 onwards. For example: one, four, 11, 25.
- Do not start a sentence with a digit – write out the number instead.



## Example

When to use digits	When to use words
Your baby is usually crawling at 1 year.	Take it one day at a time.
Eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables.	There are five food groups.
Most cereals contain over 10 vitamins.	Ten people had the bug last week.

# Phone numbers

- Write seven digit numbers as 3 numbers (space) 4 numbers.
- Write area codes in brackets.
- Write low-cost or free numbers in the way that people are likely to remember them.
- If including international code for Ireland, write only 353 first and insert hyphens between other parts of the phone number.
- Don't use brackets for mobile number prefixes.

## Example

Type of number	How to write it
Usual local number	(01) 882 3461 (021) 492 1641 (051) 842 815
Low cost or free number	LoCall 1890 240 400 HSE Info-line 1850 24 1850 Freephone 1800 34 33 34
Irish number from abroad	353-71-342 5876
Mobile number	087 286 0135

# Paragraphs

- Limit each paragraph to one idea.
- Use bullet points to break up dense paragraphs.

See Part C for more information on laying out paragraphs.

## Paragraph sub-headings and labels

- Insert informative sub-headings every two to four paragraphs, depending on the length of your publication, to break up information. This is particularly important for reports.
- Do not label individual paragraphs (for example 1.1, 2.2.3), unless citing legal information or producing a consultation paper. In this case use numbers for paragraphs and small letters for parts of paragraphs.

# Percentages

- Use these only when you must include an exact figure for a statistic.
- Define the percentage as a rough fraction in brackets right afterwards.
- Use digits and % sign.

## Example

### When to use percentages

For precise information



In the study, 31% of people (nearly a third) said they enjoyed walking.

### When to avoid percentages

When a fraction is enough



Two thirds of people are not getting enough exercise.

When words are easier to understand



You are five times more likely to have heart trouble if you smoke.

Two in five people do not eat enough fibre.

# Plurals

**Never** write plurals with an apostrophe before the 's'.

## Example

- It is important to protect yourself against STIs.
- Fruit and vegetables are great sources of nutrition.

## Plural and singular for groups

Treat collective nouns – those used for a group of things or people – as plural. This means using plural verb forms with them.

## Example

- The department need to decide which publication needs urgent attention.
- The group have discussed how best to present the information for children.



Plural

Treat named organisations or groups as singular.

## Example

- The HSE is divided into four areas.
- The Government has adopted a number of health policies.



Singular

# Punctuation

## Apostrophe

- Use the apostrophe to show possession.  
The apostrophe follows the possessing noun – the thing or person that owns something else.

### Example

- Support your partner when they are dealing with **your child's** misbehaviour.
- You can contact the **women's refuge** centre for more information.
- Your goals are the same as other **parents' goals**.

- Use it to show that letters have been left out.

### Example

- **Don't** forget to sign the consent form.
- These tips **won't** work overnight.
- If **you're** not sure, ask for advice.

- Use it to distinguish 'it is' from 'its'.

### Example

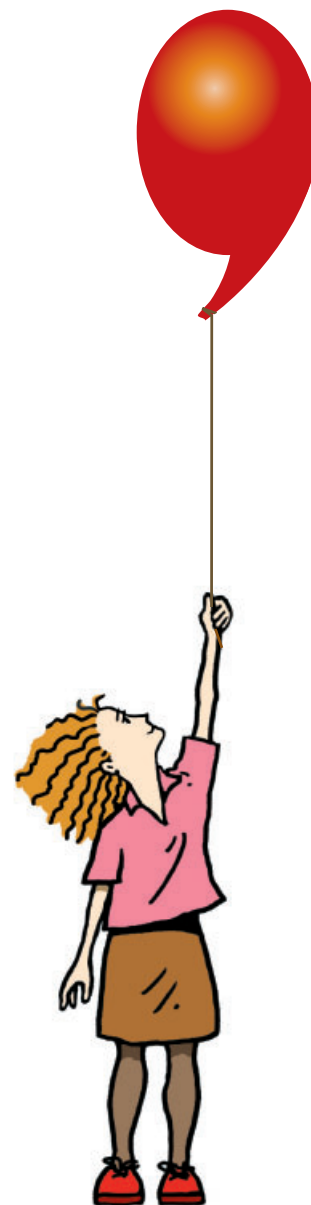
- **It's** hard to know what to do right away.
- **Its** aim is to help you develop healthy habits during pregnancy.

## Colons and semi-colons

- Use colons to introduce lists and semi-colons to punctuate longer lists.

### Example

The organisation will concentrate on three areas: research, policy and communications.



See Lists and bullet points on pages 12-14 for further examples.

## Commas

- Use commas in pairs for non-essential information.

### Example

- The medicine, **which is available as a liquid or tablet**, treats heartburn and acid indigestion.
- If you cannot work, for example **because you are sick or disabled**, you may be able to claim income support.

- Use a comma before the following words when they link two complete thoughts within a sentence: 'for', 'and', 'nor', 'but', 'or', 'yet' and 'so'.

### Example

- Most of the training places are filled, **but** we expect some cancellations.
- The researchers asked many relevant questions, **so** we hope the results of their study are useful.
- The doctor used pictures to explain the illness, yet the patient still didn't understand it.

- Use a comma to separate an introductory word or phrase from the rest of a sentence, except if the sentence is quite short.

- Use a comma if the sentence starts with words such as 'while', 'because', 'when', 'if', 'after', 'although' or 'before'.

### Example

- **After** it received funding for the project, the organisation employed a new project manager.
- **If** you do not have copy of the first information pack, ask your local public health nurse or health promotion office for one.
- **Before** you take the medication, make sure you understand its side effects.

- Use a comma if the sentence starts with 'to'.

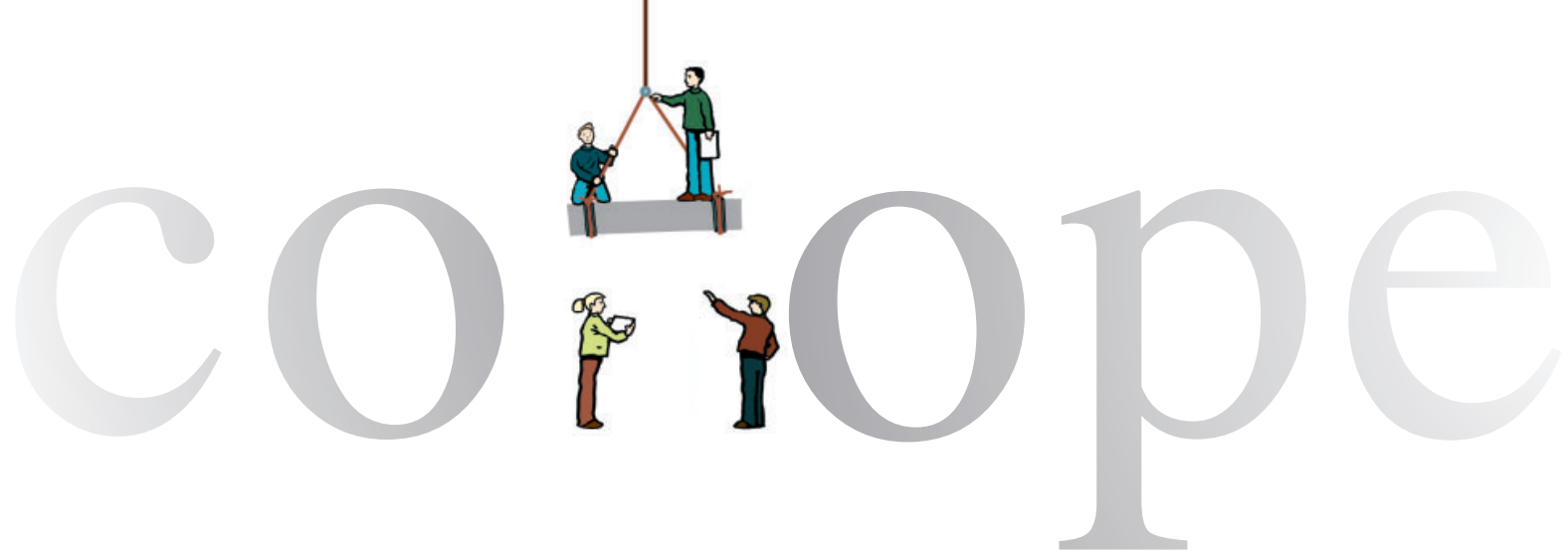
### Example

- **To** end the deadlock, the two sides climbed down from their positions.
- **To** open the container, press and twist the cap at the same time.

- Insert a comma if the sentence starts with words such as 'firstly', 'most importantly', 'similarly' or 'finally'.

### Example

- **Most importantly**, patients should understand their rights and obligations.
- **Firstly**, make sure you fill in the form correctly.



## Hyphens

- Use these to link words together to form an adjective.
- Use these for certain prefixes to avoid awkward-looking words and distinguish between meanings of similar words.

### Example

Adjectives and nouns



part-time work  
hard-to-reach group  
means-tested payment  
long-term, medium-term

Awkward-looking words – where two vowels are together when a prefix is added to a word



co-ordinate instead of coordinate  
co-operate instead of cooperate

Similar words



re-form, reform

## Quotation marks (double)

- Only use these for quoted speech.
- If you are using a quote in a full sentence:
  - insert a comma before the first quotation mark,
  - start the quote with a capital letter, and
  - insert a full stop before the second quotation mark.

### Example

The manager said, "We must decide what to do next."

- Only use that before quoted speech if you are quoting a short phrase.

Instead of		Write
She said that "It is an honour and a privilege to speak here."	➔	She said that it was "an honour and a privilege" to speak at the presentation.  or  She said, "It is an honour and a privilege to speak here."

## Quotation marks (single)

- Use these the first time you introduce an unfamiliar term.

### Example

The term 'dehydration' means...

- Use these for a quote within another quote.

### Example

The manager said, "We must focus our activity on meeting what we call 'key objectives' over the next six months."

## Sentence length

- Try to keep sentences to an average length of 15 to 20 words.
- Mix shorter and longer sentences for variety.

## Designers and printers

**Designers** will design your publication including layout and illustrations.

**Printers** will print the document you provide. Some printers will provide guidance on layout and illustrations.

Some companies provide both a design and print service. Ask to see samples of previous work when choosing a designer or printer.

To make sure your final product is an easy-to-read document, you will need to give the designer or printer specific instructions such as font size and types of emphasis to use.

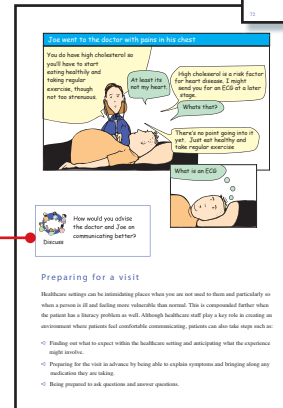
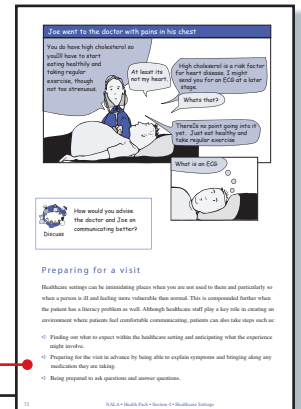
Select the specific information or messages you want to support with images or graphics. For reports, identify which information needs to be laid out in a consistent style throughout the document.

## Guidelines

### Colour

You have a number of options for printed publications:

- **Black and white** – black text on white background, graphics and illustrations in shades of black and white
- **Two-colour** - two colours plus white, usually black and another colour on a white background
- **Full-colour** - allows more flexibility with graphics and other illustrations, but more expensive to print



For reports and large documents, it is more cost effective to have full-colour covers with two colours inside, or full-colour covers with black and white inside.



## Background colour

Most people find it easier to read dark text on a light background. However, light coloured paper or a solid colour background can be used. Make sure that there is a strong contrast between the background colour and the text colour. Do not put text over images, logos or watermarks.

Background colour and text with poor contrast

Background colour and text with good contrast

When using light coloured text on a dark background make sure to use a bold font.

Light coloured text on dark background using ordinary font

Light coloured text on dark background using bold font

## Logo

All publications must carry the HSE logo on the cover. The logo is designed to work across all mediums – print, advertising, point of sale, etching, signage and engraving.

- There are three colour options



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

Full colour and vertical placing

Black and white



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

Horizontal placing



- To maximise impact and legibility the full colour logo must only be used on a white background.
- The colours and layout of the logo cannot be changed. The symbol and text of the logo must always be used together. The logo and text can be reversed out in white on a full colour cover.
- The HSE logo must be given equal prominence to other logos that may appear on a publication.

The HSE Corporate Style Guide is available from HSE Communications Departments and provides detailed guidance for printers and designers on the logo colours and placing.

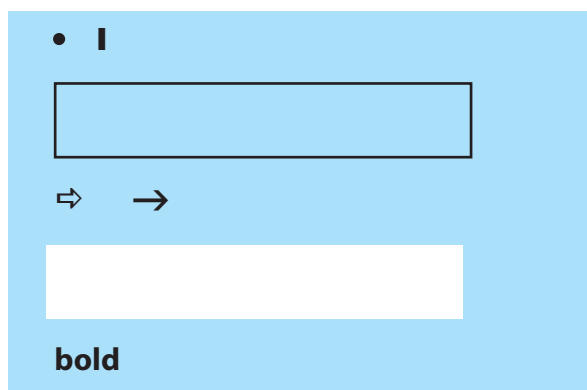
# Emphasis

- Do not underline words or write them in all capital letters.
- Use italics for names of publications and single words if necessary, but not for phrases or sentences.

Instead of		Write
IMPORTANT	→	Important
<i>Make sure you take the right dose.</i>	→	Make sure you take the right dose.
<u>You have 3 months to apply.</u>	→	You have 3 months to apply.

Direct readers to the message using:

- bullets
- boxes
- arrows
- white space
- bold type



# Font

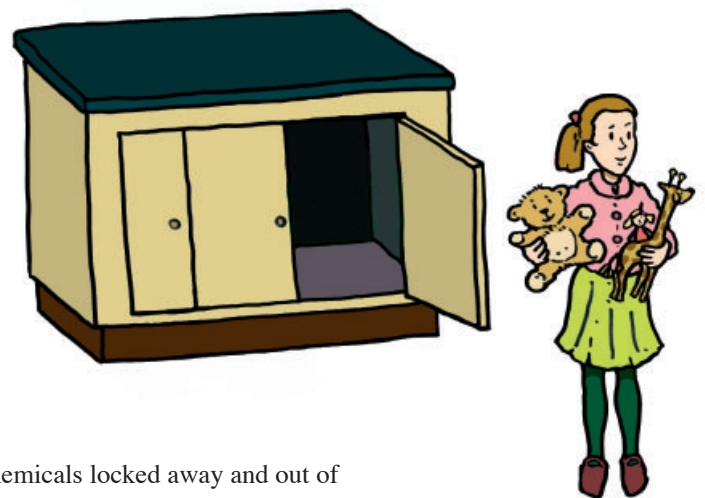
- Use a clear readable font.
- Aim to use at least 11 point, but preferably 12 point as standard.
- Increase the font size by at least 2 points for headings.
- Increase the font to at least 14 point for materials for vision impaired readers.
- Try to use no more than three font sizes on a page.

# Graphics and pictures

- Use graphics and pictures to convey messages rather than decorate the publication.
- Make the message easy to grasp at a glance – one clear message per graphic.
- Use graphics and photographs that your audience will identify with.
- Be inclusive – include men, women, older and younger people and people from different ethnic backgrounds as appropriate.
- Charts are very useful for illustrating research and technical information but make sure that the information in them is clear.
- Do not use text over images or logos.
- Do not wrap text around graphics or pictures.
- Aim to show only the actions you want readers to take.

## Example

If you must show the actions you don't want your readers to take, make sure you say nearby what you do want them to do.

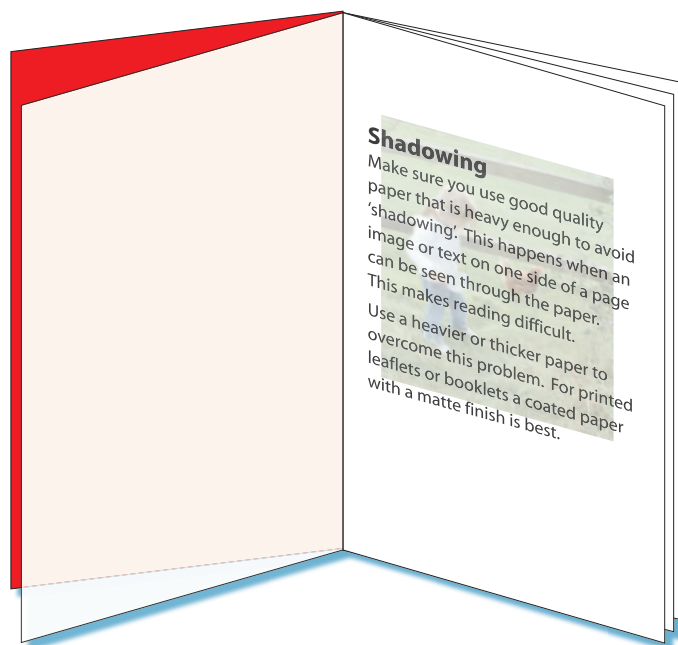


- Keep all medicines and chemicals locked away and out of the reach of your children.
- Keep all chemicals in the containers you bought them in to avoid confusion.

## Paper

Use good quality paper that is heavy enough to avoid shadowing. Shadowing happens when images or text on one side of a page can be seen through the paper on the other side.

For printed leaflets or booklets a coated paper with a matte finish is best.



### Shadowing

Make sure you use good quality paper that is heavy enough to avoid 'shadowing'. This happens when an image or text on one side of a page can be seen through the paper. This makes reading difficult. Use a heavier or thicker paper to overcome this problem. For printed leaflets or booklets a coated paper with a matte finish is best.

## Tables and charts

Tables and charts can be helpful for laying out information. However, your audience may not be familiar with how they work.

Try to design your tables and charts to include all the information needed to understand their content, for example labels, numbers and titles.

Keep symbols such as '\*' or '+' and formula that link information provided in paragraphs, tables or charts to additional information elsewhere in a document. These are not a common feature of everyday written material.

## Text layout

- Left align text in paragraphs to avoid unsightly gaps between words.
- Leave a space of one line between paragraphs.
- Try to start and end paragraphs on the same page.
- Use 1.5 line spacing.
- Use 2.5cm margins at least.

### Instead of

#### justified

The Health Service Executive under the National Intercultural Healthcare Strategy is developing a set of national guidelines, policies and protocols on producing, translating and culture proofing information materials for minority ethnic groups.

### Write

#### left aligned

The Health Service Executive under the National Intercultural Healthcare Strategy is developing a set of national guidelines, policies and protocols on producing, translating and culture proofing information materials for minority ethnic groups.



## Accessible information

Information on health and health services is important to everyone. So it is essential that you ensure your information is accessible to all groups, including ethnic minority groups and people with disabilities.

### Producing information for diverse groups

You will need to consider whether the information and format used for the general public is suitable for everyone to use. You may need to consider developing specific information in formats such as audio, DVD or Braille.

The Citizens Information Board document *Access to Information for All* gives guidance on producing information for a range of diverse groups, including people with disabilities. This document is available at [www.citizensinformationboard.ie](http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie).

Working with local groups representing the target audience can help you make sure your format and information meets their needs. HSE Traveller Health Projects and a number of non-governmental organisations provide invaluable assistance when developing materials for diverse groups. See page 29/30 for some contact details. In addition, many healthcare settings have Diversity Groups (or similar), which oversee equality and diversity projects. These groups have members from a range of grades and disciplines within the HSE. These include Human Resources, Health Promotion, Social Inclusion, Traveller Health Units and staff from various cultures. You can find out about your local Diversity Group by contacting staff who work in any of the named disciplines. You should link with this group in producing and translating information.

### Producing information for minority ethnic groups

The Health Service Executive is, under the National Intercultural Healthcare Strategy, developing a set of national guidelines on producing, translating and culture proofing information materials for minority ethnic groups. These will complement the information provided in this document.

Practices vary within and across cultures, so you cannot assume that other cultures and communities perceive or understand information messages in the same way as the main population of the country. Beliefs about illness, treatments and even the idea of health can vary. You need to culture proof your information whether it is produced in English or another language. This applies to images as well as to written information.

## Examples of potential areas of cultural misunderstanding

### Written information

Snacking is common among Irish children but is not usual in some African cultures. Is it appropriate to promote 'healthy snacks for children' in information for this audience?

### Images

A UK Hospital Trust found that the attendance rates for women from cultures where modesty is more emphasised was low. To address this, they included images of loosely-clothed women in their advertising campaign, which led to higher attendance.

### Best practice in producing information for minority ethnic groups

- Work with a team that includes minority ethnic representation. The Diversity Group (or equivalent) in the service should be able to assist with this. Seek guidance to ensure that your information is culture proofed.
- Identify the information needs of your audience and the specific language(s) they read.
- Make sure you can answer all the questions in the 'Think about your audience' section on page 4.
- Identify the suitable formats to present the information – print material may not be appropriate.
- Adapt the content (tone, style, words and amount of information) for accessibility to the target audience. Material should contain simple, clear messages. Usually a limited amount of 'absolutely essential' information coupled with images that enhance the information is better than a high volume of text.
- Assess the literacy and plain English level of your document. Test information with your audience, to make sure it is produced in and translated into plain language.
- Commission translation, if necessary. Seek quotes for translation and two proof reads.
- Make any necessary adjustments before the material is distributed among the target audience.

## USEFUL CONTACTS FOR CULTURE PROOFING

### HSE Traveller Health Project staff (for Traveller health and culture)

**Counties: Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary**

Contact: Mary Kennedy  
Phone: (061) 493916  
Email: maryg.kennedy@hse.ie

**Counties: Carlow, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford**

Contact: Liam Keane  
Phone: (056) 770 3401  
Email: liam.keane@hse.ie

**Counties: Cavan and Monaghan**

Contact: Enda Galligan  
(for name of local Traveller Health staff)  
Phone: (047) 30400  
Email: enda.galligan@hse.ie

**Counties: Cork and Kerry**

Contact: Deirdre O' Reilly  
Phone: (022) 31809  
Email: deirdremary.oreilly@hse.ie

**County: Donegal**

Contact: Maire O' Leary  
Phone: (074) 912 3757, (087) 222 9510  
Email: maireb.oleary@pavee.iol.ie

**Counties: Galway, Mayo and Roscommon**

Contact: Mary Syron  
Phone: (094) 904 4234  
Email: mary.syron@hse.ie

**Counties: Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath**

Contact: Fergal Fox  
Phone: (057) 935 7035  
Email: fergal.fox@hse.ie

**County: Louth**

Contact: Denis Cahalane (for name of local Traveller Health staff)  
Phone: (042) 939 4001  
Email: denis.cahalane@hse.ie

**County: Meath**

Contact: Eileen Gilsenan  
Phone: (046) 907 1679  
Email: eileen.gilsenan@hse.ie

**Counties: Sligo and Leitrim**

Contact: Catherine Devaney  
Phone: (071) 915 5175  
Email: catherine.devaney@hse.ie

## USEFUL CONTACTS FOR CULTURE PROOFING

### Non-governmental organisations (for various ethnic minority groups)

#### **Access Ireland**

Proofing: Various communities including Roma  
Contact: Ann Moroney  
Phone: (01) 878 0589  
Email: amm@accessireland.ie

#### **Cairde**

Proofing: Various communities  
Contact: Paddy Connolly  
Phone: (01) 855 2111  
Email: ceo@cairde.ie

#### **Pavee Point**

Proofing: Traveller Culture (Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow) and Roma Community  
Contact: Collette Murray  
Phone: (01) 878 0255  
Email: ecce@pavee.iol.ie

#### **Spirasi**

Proofing: Various communities  
Contact: Sharon McGuigan  
Phone: (01) 838 9664  
Email: chipmanager@spirasi.ie



# Checklist for documents

This checklist offers a quick way for you to review a letter, leaflet, booklet or short report to see if it uses plain English and is easy to follow. Not all questions will apply to every document, but try to answer 'yes' as much as possible to the questions that do apply.

	Yes	No
<b>Language, punctuation and grammar</b>		
1. Does the document use 'you' and 'we', where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Does it use the active voice most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Does it keep technical terms and abbreviations to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Does it define any necessary terms and abbreviations clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Does it keep 'corporate jargon' to a minimum?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Does it avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Does it use the same term for the same concept throughout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Does it have an average of 15 to 20 words in each sentence?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Does it use the simplest verb tense possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Does it avoid abstract nouns where possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Does it use correct punctuation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Do nouns and verbs agree (singular noun with singular verb, for example)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Structure</b>		
13. Does it organise information according to the reader's needs and interests?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Does it use informative headings or questions to break up text?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Does it include a natural flow from one point to the next?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Are paragraphs relatively short?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Does it use bullet point lists for detailed or complicated information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Page design</b>		
18. Does it avoid underlining, groups of italics and unnecessary capital letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Is text in a readable typeface (font), aligned to the left and 1.5 spaced?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Are images, charts or blocks of colour, if any, clear and relevant to the text?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Useful websites

For information and guidance on assessing how literacy friendly your healthcare environment is visit [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)

Other literacy websites include:

[www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie)

[www.healthliteracy.ie](http://www.healthliteracy.ie)

[www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy)

[www.cpha.ca](http://www.cpha.ca)



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Further copies can be downloaded from [www.healthpromotion.ie](http://www.healthpromotion.ie)