Say it in plain English

In looking over our Masterclasses, we were surprised that we hadn't written one on using plain language. Perhaps it was because it is a given and therefore needed little further explanation.

But we do see papers that aren't written in plain English.[1] So we thought it was worth a few quick comments.

It's all about getting your message across.

We know that most policy issues are complex and tricky. The art of providing great policy advice is communicating the complexities in a simple, easy-to-read and understandable way.

Policy advice shouldn't be written like academic papers or in language from particular professional disciplines. Using plain language often goes against what we are taught at university or school. This can be hard work and certainly takes some effort and adjustment.

Using plain language is a normal requirement

Most guidance we've seen requires reports to Council to be written in plain language. Of course, the vast majority are in the public domain, so general readability also needs to be considered.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Policy Quality Framework requires that any policy advice "*is communicated in a clear, concise and compelling way*".[2] Some further detail and some helpful hints have been developed by The Policy Project.[3] These also have relevance for Council reports and papers.

Write so it can be read once and understood

Mayors and Councillors are busy people. Many of them continue in their own professions and businesses and are Councillors. As Councillors, they'll have council meetings and committee meetings, workshops, meetings with council officers, involvement in hearings panels, engagement with stakeholders, and meetings with constituents. Not to mention a personal life. There are papers to read and matters to

consider for all of these meetings. And they often cover complex, controversial issues. There is a lot at stake!

They fit reading papers in and around these diary commitments. This can make for large reading piles in evenings and weekends and in short periods between appointments and meetings.

This means, that to be effective, your papers must be easy to read and understand at pace.

Don't write like a Booker Prize-winning novel – where often a paragraph has to be read more than once to understand. But more like the Readers' Digest condensed version – clear and crisp.[4]

Write for your audience

Consider who you are writing for. If your paper is just going to your smaller group of Councillors focused on a particular issue or sector, and it's a topic you brief on often, you can assume that they know the more technical terms. And therefore use them freely (but still with care!).

If it is a new topic or only gets an occasional briefing, some reminders will be needed.

But if it is going to the Council (or Board) as a whole, you need to write in a way that they all can understand the issues, even when they are not so familiar with the subject matter.

Not too much jargon

All workplaces, sectors and professions have their own jargon. In Council, you'll use a wide range of different jargon and technical terms across the organisations – engineers, planners, accountants, lawyers and scientists all have their own.

And, given the complexities of advice and the sorts of decisions Councils have to make – your papers will inevitably need some technical jargon.

But take care not to overuse it. Even for a well-informed and experienced Councillor, a paper heavy with jargon can make for hard work.

---

[1] One of our earlier Masterclasses provides some advice about using te reo in papers
https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_15_te_reo_maori.pdf

[2] https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-12/policy-quality-framework-full.pdf

[3] https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-12/writing-ministers-and-cabinet.pdf

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reader%27s_Digest_Condensed_Books

Introduce technical language carefully. This is often done in early briefings to new Councillors or ones moving into new sectors. A glossary of key terms can be included (and subsequently used as a ready reference guide). This technique can also be used when introducing a new topic. A few carefully used footnotes may also be helpful.

Avoid acronyms

There are plenty of acronyms that become part of everyday use. The World Health Organization says "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2" instead of COVID-19? There are also those used, like jargon, in particular sectors on particular issues.

Of course, these well-known acronyms can and should be used to make papers shorter and easier to understand. But avoid using too many in a single sentence.

We hold to the convention of spelling out an acronym in full the first time it is used. But we still recommend they be used sparingly and with caution.

Also, avoid making new acronyms for long technical terms which will not be used very often. These don't naturally stick in mind and make reading much harder.

Try abbreviating these to a word rather than an acronym, if you must – it can be easier to read. For example, The Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement can be 'the Agreement'.

Replace complex words with plain words

The unnecessary use of 'big' words makes papers harder to read than they should be.

This is a habit that many of us slip into. It's taught to us in school and university – and is a hallmark of bureaucracy.

A number of years ago, the Ministry of Social Development undertook its Better Letters project. This was designed to make sure all their standard letters to clients were written in plain language. They found it surprising how much complex language was used in what were meant to be simple, clear letters. They won a Plain English Award for this project.[5] The same principles could be used in policy advice papers.

Here are some examples:[6]

accordingly	so
moreover	and
thereafter	then
commence	start
beneficial	useful

Replace wordy phrases with more concise words

Some phrases that find their way into everyday use are more complicated than is needed. Try and simplify them too:[7]

a large number of	many
as a consequence	because
in the near future	soon
it would be appreciated if	please
with reference too	about

Use your organisational style guide

Many organisations have style guides. While one of their main purposes is to encourage consistency, these also encourage plain language.

They are often compiled by Communications Teams – but should be relatively easy to access. Often we find they aren't used as much as they could be by policy analysts.

If your Council doesn't have one, a good standard one is The Write Group's The Write Style Guide. You can order it from their website (www.write.co.nz), or if you've been on one of their writing courses, they provide take-home material.

Short sentences, short paragraphs

Plain language will only remain plain if you use short sentences and paragraphs.

Try to avoid multi-clause sentences. They are hard to read. Or, as one of our colleagues in the Ministry of Transport called them – freight train sentences. An apt description. A long sentence can often be split into shorter sentences.

Similarly, keep paragraphs short. A general rule is one issue, one paragraph.

This applies even more so if you are writing in dot points. See our 2021 Masterclass on tips and tricks for writing effective dot points.[8]

Avoid errors

Of course, any paper will be hard to read if it contains typos, spelling mistakes and the like. They can also be hugely distracting.

Robust and effective QA is critical. We've done several masterclasses on effective QA.[9]

A robust QA looks for errors and encourages plain language

A good QA will not only chase down typos, formatting issues, grammar and spelling mistakes. It should also look for ways of making the paper more readable.

In particular:

- taking out or replacing unnecessary jargon and acronyms
- converting complicated words and phrases to plain and concise words – but without losing meaning.

This can be done as edits (using tracked changes) but also as suggestions for rewording.

We all need to improve our skills in this area. For some of us, it goes against the grain. But some people are better at this than others. Seek out their help for particularly important pieces of work.

Electronic tools check for plain language

The simple spelling and grammar checking functions in Microsoft Word also provide some pointers on changes that can be made to plain language.

There are other more sophisticated tools too.

Try:

- Microsoft Editor – https://www.microsoft.com/en-nz/microsoft-365/microsoft-editor?activetab=tabs%3afaqheaderregion3
- Drivel Defence – part of the public campaign in the UK to use plain language, especially in Government – rhttp://www.plainenglish.co.uk/drivel-defence.html
- StyleWriter – https://write.co.nz/stylewriter-editing-software/ – recommended by The Write Group.

There are many other tools available on the internet.

A quote to finish with...

…. from someone who has read many more policy papers than most.

"Human relationships depend on communication. Bad writing is a barrier to communication. When a large organisation such as the Government tries to communicate with the man and woman in the street the scope for misunderstanding is enormous. Too often clarity and simplicity are overwhelmed by pompous words, long sentences and endless paragraphs.

If we all wrote in plain English, how much easier – and efficient – life would be. It is no exaggeration to describe plain English as a fundamental tool of good Government.

Some people think that flowery language and complicated writing is a sign of intellectual strength. They are wrong. Some of our greatest communicators were – and are – passionate believers in the simplicity of the written word. As Winston Churchill described a particularly tortured piece of 'officialese': 'This is the sort of English up with which I will not put'. The Civil Service and public administration generally have made great strides in using plain English in recent years. While far from extinct, jargon and 'officialese' are dying out. I would like to see them banished forever. Plain English must be the aim of all who work in Government."

Baroness Thatcher, former UK Prime Minister

---

[8] See Masterclass 28 *Effective key points* https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2028%20LG%20Key%20points%20-%202022.pdf

[9] Masterclass 13 *Quality assurance – getting the basics* right https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/brief_13_qa_-_practical_ideas_1.pdf and

Masterclass 21 *Quality assurance vs peer review* https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Local%20Government/Brief%2021%20LG%20Peer%20review%20vs%20QA%20-%202022.pdf