

Writing for NICE: a guide to help you write more clearly

Corporate document

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Contents

Rules of clear writing.....	3
Know your reader	3
Plan ahead	3
Keep it short	4
Use clear English	6
Stay active	9
Writing recommendations.....	11
Give direct instructions.....	11
Useful resources.....	13

Rules of clear writing

Know your reader

At NICE we are often writing for an expert audience. But this does not mean they want to read complex, technical writing. In fact, research shows that the more educated the person, the greater is their preference for clear English.

We also communicate with members of the public who may not just want to read our 'Information for the public' guides, particularly if they are commenting on a guideline during consultation.

So, when you are planning your work, ask yourself:

- Who will be reading what I write?
- Why are they reading it?
- How much do they know about the subject already?
- What do I want them to do with the information they read?

Plan ahead

Before you write anything, take a few minutes to jot down notes about what you want to say. Ask yourself:

Have I included all the essential information?

Do I answer: who, what, when, where, why and how?

What is the best structure for the document?

Make sure you put the information in a logical order. Write a brief outline with the main headings and subheadings, and what you plan to include under each one. Keep sections short and make sure you get your main message across in the title and first paragraph.

Think about the inverted pyramid structure used in a news story – that means putting your main conclusions first to grab people's attention.

How will the document be presented?

Bear in mind that when people read on screen they scan the text in broad sweeps and may not read every word. Use your headings, subheadings and bullet lists to break up the text and help people find the information they need.

Keep it short

Remember to:

- use short sentences: 15–20 words is ideal, 30 words is the maximum
- restrict yourself to 1 main idea per sentence
- avoid unnecessary words and phrases
- avoid repetition
- read what you've written out loud – does it sound right?

Check for unnecessary words

Sometimes we use extra words or phrases that don't add anything to the meaning, often to sound more important or add emphasis.

Examples

Patients can be treated at home.

Not: Patients can be treated in the home setting.

Many patients do not understand what is happening to them in hospital.

Not: Many patients do not understand what is happening to them in a hospital environment.

Shorter

If someone with this condition needs hospital admission, this should be under the care of a consultant with specialist training.

Long-winded

In circumstances where someone with this condition needs hospital admission, it is recommended that the patient be admitted only under the care of a team led by a consultant who has been trained in the management of the condition during his/her higher specialist training.

Unnecessary adjectives

Adjectives and adverbs (describing words) are subjective, can dilute your meaning and add to your word count.

Examples

There is little indication that this new approach is related to better overall self-management.

For some people, it may be very difficult and overwhelming to disclose details of their traumatic events.

Use an apostrophe to keep sentences shorter

Example

The guideline's recommendations do not override the healthcare professional's responsibility to make appropriate decisions.

Not: The recommendations in the guideline do not override the personal responsibility of healthcare professionals to make appropriate decisions.

Use 'you' and 'we'

Where possible, use 'you' and 'we', particularly when giving advice. It is shorter and friendlier.

Example

When guidance is issued we will post it on our website.

Use bullet points

Bullet points are a useful way of:

- presenting a series of points simply and clearly
- cutting out repetition
- breaking up long or complex sentences and paragraphs.

Use clear English

Using clear English has the advantage of saving time because it is shorter. It means using as few words as possible to get your point across, while leaving no room for ambiguity.

Avoid abbreviations

Text with a lot of abbreviations is hard to read and many readers will have to look them up. Only use them if the abbreviation is more commonly used than the spelt out version (see the [style guide](#)). Always spell them out the first time.

Never abbreviate NICE terms, such as guideline committee and final appraisal determination. You may know what the abbreviation means – someone outside your team may not.

Avoid unnecessary technical language

Technical terms include the names of diseases, tests and treatments. It is fine to use some technical terms in a document for researchers and specialists. But only use a term if you

are sure your audience will understand it, and if there is no simple alternative. If you can think of an everyday word, always use that instead.

Avoid jargon

Jargon means using words or phrases as a kind of shorthand that members of a particular group will understand. These words are often meaningless in any other context.

'Office' jargon, or management-speak, can easily creep into our writing. Words like 'cascading', 'incentivise' and 'repurposed', and phrases like 'drill down', 'blue sky thinking', 'touch base' and 'going forward' are meaningless and overcomplicate things. Usually they can be deleted without changing the main message.

Use simple, everyday words and phrases

Are you using a complex word or phrase when a shorter one will do? Here are some common examples.

Terms to avoid

Avoid	Use
A large number of	Many, a lot of
Amongst	Among
Approximately	About
Attempt	Try
At the time that	When
Behind schedule	Late
Commence, initiate	Start, begin
Consequently	So
Demonstrate	Show
Discontinue, terminate	End, cancel, stop
Facilitate	Let, allow, help
Following	After

Avoid	Use
Indicate	Show
In excess of	More than, over
In the process of	When
In spite of the fact that	Even though, although, despite
Prior to	Before
Regarding	About
Should you	If
The majority of	Most
Utilise	Use
With the exception of	Except
Whilst	While

Avoid vague or ambiguous words

Think about whether your meaning is clear from the word you are using. Use the most specific term you can.

Words like 'access', although commonly used, can be ambiguous. Does it mean availability of services, eligibility for referral, geographical location or transport? Make sure the meaning is clear to your reader.

'Appropriate' is often used in phrases such as 'offer appropriate advice on diet and exercise'. We would never recommend offering inappropriate advice, so we do not need to specify that it should be appropriate. If we know people are giving the wrong advice, it is better to spell out exactly what the right advice is.

Use a logical sentence structure

Put the key point first in your sentence.

Example

Although a small percentage take longer, most people can return to work within 4 weeks.

Better: Most people can go back to work within 4 weeks, although a small percentage take longer.

Even better (with shorter everyday words): Most people go back to work within 4 weeks, although a few may take longer.

Stay active

Passive sentences can sound long, stuffy and bureaucratic, whereas active sentences help you get your message across quickly and clearly. In active sentences, the subject is the person or thing doing the action and all the verbs are used as doing words.

1. One option is to move the person or thing doing the action to the start of the sentence:

For example: Pharmacists will help smokers to quit the habit.

Not: Smokers will be helped to quit the habit by pharmacists.

2. But whenever you can, put the action up front and use a direct instruction. The person doing the action is not stated but it will be assumed it is the reader.

Example

Priority groups to be offered advice should be specified on the basis of a local assessment of health needs.

Better: Use a local assessment of health needs to specify priority groups that should be offered advice.

Even better: Use a local health needs assessment to identify groups who should receive advice as a priority.

Avoid turning verbs into nouns

Another way to keep your writing active is to avoid turning verbs into 'zombie' nouns.

For example: Managing this condition is complex.

Not: The management of this condition is complex.

Writing recommendations

When writing recommendations remember: professionals won't put our guidance into practice if they aren't sure what we are recommending.

The rules in this guide and our [style guide](#) should help you write clear, active recommendations. Also see [chapter 9](#) of the guidelines manual. Below are the main points.

Give direct instructions

Start with a verb, if possible, to keep the action up front and direct.

1 action per recommendation

Include only 1 action per recommendation to keep it short. Or if there has to be a series of actions, use bullet points and have 1 action per bullet point.

Show the strength of the recommendation

When the evidence is strong we usually use 'offer' as the main verb. When the evidence is less certain, we use 'consider'. Make sure you are using these verbs correctly (see the [guidelines manual](#)).

Remember: Don't add 'consider' in front of 'offering' and avoid other uses of 'consider'.

Only include what readers need to know

Only tell readers what they need to do. Do not add background information to recommendations, unless recommending such a big change in practice that professionals need to know why before they will put it into practice.

Make sure the population is clear

Make sure it is always clear which group of people the recommendation applies to. You do not need to repeat this in each successive recommendation or bullet point unless the target group changes.

Be specific

Readers need to know what exactly is being recommended, and for whom. For example, they need to know if other treatments or interventions should be offered first, how many times and for how long?

Tip: Use 'and' and 'or' in lists of criteria if it helps make it clear which criteria have to be met. Or add a phrase such as 'if all of the following criteria are met' to the introductory sentence.

Use person-centred language

- Make sure the verb you use respects the person's choice and involvement – we 'offer' things rather than 'prescribe' or 'give' things to people.
- Focus on the person rather than labelling them as a 'patient' or defining them by their illness (avoid 'diabetics' and 'epileptics').
- We never say 'managing people....'. We always manage the condition. If we are talking about drugs, it is the drug, not the person, that is contraindicated or unsuitable.

Remember, you can always talk to one of the editors if you are unsure or need any help with writing recommendations.

Useful resources

- [NICE glossary](#) gives definitions of terms used on our website
- [NICE style guide](#) for house style rules such as when to spell out numbers, terms to describe different groups, and preferred spellings
- **Writing for NICE workshop** – sign up to a free half-day workshop to improve your writing. See the [writing and style hub](#) or if you are external, email WritingforNICE@nice.org.uk
- **Other useful links:**
 - [Oxford Dictionaries](#)
 - [The Hemingway app](#) helps you see how clear your writing is
 - [The readability test tool](#) shows how readable your writing is
 - [Plain English Campaign](#) has a downloadable PDF guide to writing medical information
 - [Cancer Research UK glossary](#).

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