Writing for a dyslexic audience
- How to make written material dyslexia-inclusive through use of language

A note about the footnotes in this resource
The footnotes in this resource give sources and further information. You don't have to read the footnotes to make sense of the leaflet.

A. Plain English

1) Sentence length[1]

  ✓ **Use** short sentences (14 words maximum)

  ✗ **Avoid** sentences over 14 words long

2) Word length

  ✓ **Use** short words e.g. 'confused'

  ✗ **Avoid** long, multisyllabic words e.g. 'discombobulated'

3) Vocabulary

  ✓ **Use** simple vocabulary. E.g. say 'there was *no* rain' instead of 'there was *an absence of* rain'.[2]

  ✓ **Use** words that are appropriate for your audience

4) ✓ Explain jargon

  E.g. say 'The Government gave me a loan through *a scheme called the Green Deal*' instead of 'I qualified for *the Green Deal*'

5) ✓ Explain abbreviations

  E.g. say 'Community Interest Company' instead of 'CIC'.

6) ✓ Use active verbs

  Aim to make about 80 to 90% of your verbs active rather than passive[3] e.g. say 'someone stole my bike' instead of 'my bike was stolen'

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[1] "Research shows that 50% of readers get lost if a sentence exceeds 14 words, and 80% lose it after 20 words". From Tilly Mortimore, 'Dyslexia and Learning Style - A Practitioner's Handbook', p277. Wiley, Chichester, 2008. ISBN 978-0470511688

[2] In the example above, 'no' is a plain English alternative to 'an absence of'. You can search for plain English alternatives at http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/how-to-write-in-plain-english.html

7) ✓ Use lists

  a) Use lists instead of continuous text e.g. say 'The colours of the rainbow are violet, indigo, blue' etc. instead of 'The colours of the rainbow are firstly, violet, followed by indigo, then blue' etc.

  b) Use a list of 'do's and don'ts' to highlight aspects of good practice

  c) Use bullet points in your lists whenever appropriate

8) ✗ Avoid nominalizations[4]

  E.g. instead of 'We had a *discussion* about desks', say 'We *discussed* desks'.

B. Other aspects of language and style

1) ✓ Use examples to illustrate points[5]
  E.g. 'I like fruit, for example apples and oranges'.

2) Communication

  a) **✓ Use crisp, clear and concise communication**
  E.g. say 'Please…' instead of 'I should be grateful if you would…'

  b) **✓ Use concrete communication instead of abstract communication**
  E.g. use clearly structured and well told stories[6] instead of textbook explanations

  c) **✓ Be explicit**
  State meanings directly instead of implicitly implying them. E.g. say 'He really didn't want it' instead of 'It was the last thing he wanted'

3) ✗ Avoid double negatives
  E.g. 'It's not unlikely that…'[7]

4) ✓ Use visual imagery[8] , analogies and parallels

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[3] For further information, see http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides/60-how-to-write-in-plain-english.html

[4] A nominalization is the name of something that isn't a physical object, such as a process, technique or emotion

[5] Jill Hammond, Fabian Hercules and Ruth McPherson, 'Understanding Dyslexia - An Introduction for Dyslexic Students in Higher Education', revised edition p82. The Glasgow School of Art, 2000.

[6] E.g. Jean Augur, 'This book doesn't make sense: living and learning with dyslexia'. Wiley, Chichester, 1996. ISBN 978-1-897635-13-1

[7] The British Dyslexia Association Style Guide
http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/educator/additional-resources-for-educators

E.g. 'His head is in the clouds', 'I'm throwing in the towel', 'She's hard as nails', 'Keeping our discussion focussed is like herding cats'

5) ✘ Avoid Subordinate clauses[9]
E.g. say 'My former neighbour Sue loved jazz' (no sub-clause) instead of 'Sue, *who was my neighbour*, loved jazz' (sub-clause in italics).

6) Metaphors[10]
✓ **Explain metaphors** e.g. 'He's a bit Marmite - you either love him or can't stand him'.

✘ **Avoid unexplained metaphors** e.g. 'He's a bit Marmite'; 'He's a pussycat'.

7) Words that are subtly different
✘ Avoid asking dyslexic people to distinguish between words that are subtly different e.g. can't / won't; try / do; need / want; should / want; might / will; make / feel; maybe / perhaps

8) ✓ Use headings and subheadings
These help provide a structure and give the gist of the content. E.g. the heading and subheadings in this document show what the content is about.

Unreferenced points are from the following sources

1) Rosemary Scott, 'Dyslexia and Counselling', pp246-252. Whurr, London, 2004. ISBN: 978-1-86156-395-8

2) 'How to write in plain English'
http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/how-to-write-in-plain-english.html

3) British Dyslexia Association Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide
http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/educator/additional-resources-for-educators

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[8] See the Research Reference List at
http://www.dyslexia.com/research/articles/visual-imagery-for-reading-comprehension
[9] A subordinate clause is part of a sentence that acts like a noun, adjective or adverb and is not able to function as an independent sentence. I include this point unreferenced, on the basis of personal experience.
[10] For an explanation of metaphors, and how they can help people to understand things, see Gillie Bolton, 'The Writer's Key', chapter 7. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2013. ISBN 978-1849054751.