Tips on Writing Plain English

1. Consider carefully your purpose and message before starting to write – clear writing and clear thinking go hand in hand.

2. Wear the readers’ shoes – how would you feel in their position?

3. Plan a structure that will help the reader, perhaps with headings, bullet-point lists, and a pithy summary of key points at the start.

4. In letters and emails, tell the reader clearly, concisely and courteously what has happened, how the situation stands, and what they can expect next.

5. Match your writing to the needs and knowledge of the readers – some of them may be baffled by official jargon and procedures.

6. Write sentences that average 15–20 words.

7. Keep the word order simple. In most sentences, put the doer early and follow it with an active-voice verb.

8. Take pride in using everyday English, sound grammar and accurate punctuation.

9. Where appropriate, use ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’ to make the writing more human.

10. Maintain the flow by starting some of your sentences with connectors like ‘but’, ‘however’, ‘so’ and ‘because’.

11. Use commands when writing instructions.

12. Cut unnecessary words.

13. Check that the facts and judgement are right. Nothing compensates for inaccuracy or illogicality.

14. Pre-test your high-use documents with typical readers.

15. Apply common sense and scepticism to all guidance about writing.

• Find out more from the ‘Oxford Guide to Plain English’ by Martin Cutts, price £7.99.
• For details of the Clear English Standard, please visit our website, www.clearest.co.uk.