

## WRITING ENGLISH TEXTS FOR A MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

### Some Do's and Don'ts for Native and near-native English language Writers

DO	WHY
Choose simple words.	It is a good idea to make things as easy for your reader as possible. Don't send your reader running to the dictionary when you could use another more common word.
Keep sentences short.	Short sentences keep the reader focused. Long sentences often contain multiple concepts. The reader often needs to re-read longer sentences. Bullet points often help to organize a series of ideas very clearly, and they avoid long paragraphs.
Choose more "formal" vocabulary.	<p>Informal English is full of phrasal verbs (see footer 2), slang and other language specific to a place or culture. It may feel unnatural, or less 'friendly' at the beginning, but your readers will appreciate it if you write in a clear way, choosing more "formal" vocabulary.</p> <p>Here is an example.</p> <p>Informal message: Hi folks, we are now at the half way mark of our discussion. Can you put up with more of this stuff or shall we wrap up here and now?</p> <p>Formal message: Hi everyone, we have one week more for discussion. Do you want to continue or do you want to finish immediately?</p>
Provide an explanation or definition in brackets if the word or expression is not common.	<p>Help your reader by providing a short explanation or more commonly used alternative after the less-common word or expression. Use this especially when you want to appeal to readers familiar with informal/colloquial English, but you don't want to exclude less experienced readers.</p> <p>eg. I informed them that we will not put up with (tolerate) the situation much longer.</p>
Use the "active voice" <sup>1</sup> when you can.	It is immediately clear to the reader who or what is the "actor" in the sentence. eg. APC Council approved the document (active) vs The document was approved

<sup>1</sup> In an *active* sentence, the subject refers to the "doer" or "actor" of the action of the verb. E.g., In 'The cat chased the mouse.' the cat is the actor. But the *passive* form allows us to put someone or something that is not the actor first, in the position of the subject. E.g., In 'The mouse was chased by the cat.' the passive allows us to save the actor to the end of the

		(passive).
	Use less complex grammatical structures when you can.	It makes reading less taxing for your audience. For example, avoid the _ing form, if you can use a subject instead. eg "We could benefit by extending the meeting" can be re-written by introducing the actor, "We could benefit if we extend the meeting" .
	Avoid using complex introductory phrases.	For example, don't write: "What was a good idea, was her plan to meet with members". Instead, be more direct. Write: "Her plan to meet with members was a good idea."
	Define abbreviations and acronyms at the beginning of your text.	This is a basic requirement of good writing in any language. Even better, include a glossary or key at the beginning or end of your text, if you are going to use lots of acronyms.
	DON'T	WHY
	Don't use contractions eg use "do not" and not "don't".	Contractions (n't, 'll, 's) are not used frequently in other languages.
	Avoid phrasal verbs <sup>2</sup> . You can help romance language readers (eg Spanish, Romanian) by using the apparently more "formal", Latin-based verbs instead. eg don't use "carry on", write "continue".	English has many phrasal verbs which come from its Anglo-Saxon origins. Native English speakers learn phrasal verbs very early in life, usually before they learn the more "formal" Latin or French-based alternative. Compare "she turned up at my door" to "she arrived at my door". Which feels more informal? Probably the first example, which is based on the Anglo-Saxon, rather than the French "arriver". However, phrasal verbs are a nightmare to non-native language readers! Think about it. There is nothing logical to indicate to a non-English speaker that "turn up" means "appear" or "arrive". S/he needs to LEARN the meaning of phrasal verbs. So choose the more formal, Latin/French-based word and make

clause which can be useful. It is useful when 1. the actor is the most important piece of information, e.g., 'The painting was painted by Van Gogh' or 2. the "actor" is described by a long phrase which could not easily be the subject e.g., 'The organization will always be remembered and supported by the activists who first received their online training there.'

<sup>2</sup> A phrasal verb consists of verb + adverb (e.g, 'to put up' (give shelter), 'to put up with' (tolerate) , 'to put off' (postpone)). The two (or three) words form an idiom: it is called a phrasal verb only if the adverb CHANGES THE MEANING of the verb. E.g. , "He picked up the book" (literal) vs "He picked up English" (phrasal). The first example uses a verb + preposition. It has a literal meaning. The second example uses a phrasal verb. He did not literally lift the language into the air! "Up" in this case applied to "pick" changes the meaning so that now "pick up" does not mean "lift" but means "learn".

		reading easier for your audience.
	Don't use the passive voice.	It is not immediately apparent who or what is the "actor" in the sentence.
	Don't be afraid to repeat language, and avoid using undefined terms such as "this" or "that".	It may not be the "most literary" English, so you may want to follow this guideline in internal texts only. By repeating words you make the meaning of your text more obvious more quickly to your readers. In addition, avoid replacing words with undefined terms such as "this". Your reader may need to revisit the earlier part of the text to find out what "this" was.  Original message: We have one week more for discussion. [...] Do you want to continue with this? Clearer (if repetitive) message: We have one week more for discussion. [...] Do you want to continue the discussion?
	Don't use jargon.	If you must, please explain it. In this way, we can all learn. Don't assume that everyone knows what the jargon means.

Of course these are just suggestions! It is hard to follow all of them, all of the time. Even I used contractions in the guidelines!

But if we can be sensitive to the things that make texts easy or difficult to understand, it will help us our multilingual audience... If you are writing a document for APC, and want some help or advice on writing plain language texts, please contact me, Karen, APC's Communications Manager, at [khiggs@apc.org](mailto:khiggs@apc.org).

Happy writing!