

# Avoiding the main writing pitfalls

The idea that 'official' language must be wordy and stilted is still common. Shifting to simple language makes your content more relatable and helps your audience understand your message. Avoiding a few key pitfalls will make your content more readable.

## Long sentences

The ideal average sentence length depends on the audience. In general, the broader the audience, the shorter the sentences should be. Aim for an average of 15 words per sentence for content for a general audience and no more than 25 words per sentence for more technical content.

You can shorten sentences by:

- removing unnecessary words or replacing long phrases with simpler alternatives (e.g. *due to the fact that* becomes *because*). Try to identify which words add meaning to your writing and which just take up space
- making clauses into sentences (e.g. *The national reserve system includes protected areas and reserves across Australia which provide long-term protection for examples of Australia's diverse ecosystems and plant and animal species*, becomes *The national reserve system includes protected areas and reserves across Australia. These provide long-term protection for examples of Australia's diverse ecosystems and plant and animal species.*)
- changing lists within sentences to bullet points. This is especially useful for web content.

## Jargon and unnecessarily complex words

Jargon and unnecessarily complex words can make meaning unclear. To make your content more readable but still accurate:

- avoid grandiose words (e.g. *The committee performs a function analogous to ...* becomes *The committee has a similar function to ...*)
- replace technical and complex terms (e.g. *The drug is fungitoxic but not phytotoxic* becomes *The drug is toxic to fungi but not to plants*)
- add definitions (e.g. *These species are affected by increasing water temperatures and eutrophication (excess nutrients in the water).*)

## Excessive passive voice

In an active sentence, the agent is the subject and does something (e.g. *John developed the test*). In a passive sentence, the subject has something done to it by an agent (e.g. *The test was developed by John*).

The active voice has a strong, direct, clear tone, whereas the passive voice is weaker, evasive and more vague. Active language is often easier to understand, and makes clear who is doing what.

Make a passive sentence active by adding an agent:

*The textbook was written.*

becomes

*The professor wrote the textbook.*

## Describing actions with nouns

'Official' language often replaces verbs with nouns – verbs like *avoid*, *reduce* and *decide* are replaced by the nouns *avoidance*, *reduction* and *decision*. But English sentences need verbs, so if we use nouns instead of verbs we must add verbs to make our sentences work. This makes our writing wordier and less clear.

Describe actions using verbs to create shorter, more direct sentences.

*The members made [verb] a decision [noun] to conduct [verb] an investigation [noun] into the options.*

becomes

*The members decided [verb] to investigate [verb] the options.*

*We should invest [verb] in advertising [noun] to generate [verb] an improvement [noun] in our revenue.*

becomes

*We should advertise [verb] to improve [verb] our revenue.*