



HOW

TO WRITE

CLEARLY



Directorate-General for Translation
European Commission



HOW TO WRITE CLEARLY

This booklet is intended for all writers of English at the European Commission. Whether your job is drafting or translating, here are some hints – not rules – that will help you to write clearly and make sure your message ends up in your readers' brains, not in their bins.

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Le secret d'ennuyer est ... de tout dire.

The secret of being a bore ... is to tell everything.

Voltaire

Put the reader first

There are three groups of people likely to read Commission documents:

1. EU insiders (colleagues in the Commission or other institutions)
2. outside specialists
3. the general public.

The third group is by far the largest and most important. As more Commission documents are made accessible to the general public, criticism of FOG will increase.

Always bear in mind the people you're writing for: not your committee, your boss, or the reviser of your translations, but the end users. They are in a hurry. Don't overestimate their knowledge, interest or patience.

Whatever the type of document - legislation, a technical report, minutes, a press release or speech - you can enhance its impact by writing clearly. Try to see your subject matter from your readers' point of view; try to involve them ("you" is an under-used word in Commission documents); and try not to bore them.

You can avoid irritating half your readers by replacing gender-specific words (replace "layman" by "lay person"; "salesgirl" by "sales assistant"; "workman" by "worker").

Avoid "he, she/ his, her" by using "they/ their" instead.

Use verbs, not nouns

One simple step to clearer English is to change ...

this...



by the introduction of
for the allocation of
of the provision of

... to this :



by introducing
for allocating
of providing

What are we doing here? Turning a noun back into a verb. English prefers verbs to nouns. Many words ending in "-ion" are simply verbs in disguise. They are called "nominalisations" (yes, another word ending in "-ion"). Look at these:



submit an application for
carry out an evaluation of
implement an investigation of



apply for
evaluate
investigate

and there are others which don't end in "-ion":



conduct a review of
perform an assessment of
effect a renewal of



review
assess
renew

So we can improve an unclear text by turning some nouns back into verbs:



The committee **came to an agreement** to the effect that **a study should be carried out** by the consultants into the feasibility of **the provision of** national funding.



The committee **agreed** that the consultants should **study** the feasibility of **providing** national funding.



Sabotage! You can take advantage of this if you want.

If the consultants' report is too candid about the non-feasibility of providing national funding, just **effect the nominalisation** of all their hard-hitting verbs and the result will be sufficiently soporific to send your readers to sleep.

Concrete, not abstract

English is a notoriously blunt language. Too much abstract language (FOG) may make your reader suspect that something real and unpalatable is being wrapped up in verbiage.

In general, if you have a choice between an abstract word and a more concrete one that means the same, choose concrete. It will make your message more direct.

Sometimes, instead of this ... : ... you could try this:



establish

emphasise

orient

eliminate

determine

objective

initiating impulse

employment opportunities

negative evolution

decisive innovation



fix

highlight

steer

cut out

set

goal, target

trigger

jobs

downward spiral

breakthrough



Sabotage! You can take advantage of this if you want.

"These countries are asking for dates and facts, but all we can give them is **prevarication and obfuscation.**"

Active verbs, not passive...

Another easy step to clearer English is to use verbs in the active voice ("the car **hit** the tree") rather than the passive ("the tree **was hit by** the car"). Compare these:

☹️ New guidelines **have been laid down** by the President in the hope that the length of documents submitted by DGs **will be restricted** to 20 pages.

😊 The President **has laid down** new guidelines in the hope that DGs **will restrict** the length of documents to 20 pages.

Look how we can improve a text by cutting out passives ... :

☹️ **bad:** A **recommendation was made** by the European Parliament that **consideration be given** by the Member States to a simplification of the award procedure.

😊 **a bit better:** The European Parliament **made a recommendation** that the Member States **give consideration** to a simplification of the award procedure.

and then by cutting out abstract nominalisations:

😊 **much better:** The European Parliament **recommended** that the Member States **consider simplifying** the award procedure.

...except where passives are useful

You don't have to avoid passive verbs at all costs. They can be useful:

1. If there's no need to say who was responsible for the action because it's obvious. ("All Commission staff are encouraged to write clearly.")
2. If you want to focus attention on the receiver of the action by putting that first. ("One of the most controversial members of the European Parliament has been interviewed by the press about the proposal.")
3. If you want to position old or known information at the start of the sentence, so you can put new or surprising information at the end. ("After the Summit the President was interviewed by a ten-year-old pupil from the European School.")

And of course:

4.  **Sabotage!** If you want to evade responsibility.

"In my department the advice on clear English has been disregarded."

Whodunnit? Name the agent

If you follow the advice to use active verbs instead of passive ones, your writing will become clearer because you will be forced to name the agent - that is, the person or organisation or thing that carries out the action.

It's easy to identify the agent here ... :



This proposal was approved **at Commission level**.



The Commission approved this proposal.

... but not so easy here:



It is considered that tobacco advertising should be banned in the EU.

Who considers? The writer, the Commission, the public, the medical profession?

Why not name the agent?

Remember that EU texts have to be translated into several other languages - not all of which can be quite as foggy and impersonal as English. By writing vague English you are asking for non-matching translations, as each translator tries to guess what you might have meant and comes up with a different solution.

Don't be afraid to make "I" or "we" the agent.

This is perfectly acceptable, even in technical documents, and will make your meaning much clearer:



You have been informed of **our acceptance** of your project application.



We have informed you that **we have accepted** your project application.

Don't be afraid to make an inanimate object the agent

(e.g. "The Directive calls upon employers to cut working hours.") This is taboo in some other languages, but correct in English.

Making sense - managing stress

Sometimes you have to write (or improve) a text containing a mass of facts and ideas. Here are some ways of untangling the information so that readers will understand each sentence the first time they read it.

Name the agents of each action and put the actions in the order in which they occur.



Its decision on allocation of ESF assistance will be taken subsequent to receipt of all project applications at the Committee's meeting.



When all **applicants have submitted** their project applications, the **Committee will meet to decide** how much ESF aid **it will grant** to each one.

Put **old or known information at the beginning of the sentence and new or complex information at the end.**

This makes sentence linking easier, and helps the reader to follow the thread of your argument:

THE COURT OF AUDITORS' REPORT criticises agricultural spending and proposes some **new measures to prevent fraud.**

THEIR PROPOSALS include setting up a special task force **with powers to search farms.**

SUCH POWERS are not normally granted to Commission officials, but fraud prevention is now **one of the EU's main priorities.**

(Note that the passive verb is OK in the last sentence because it fits in with the flow of information).

Make sure your sentences have strong endings - that's the bit readers will remember.

If necessary, move less important information to the left. Try to avoid feeble endings.



Complete institutional reform is advocated by the report in most cases.



What the report advocates, in most cases, **is** complete institutional reform.

Some more ways of putting important information in the best position - at the end of the sentence:



For EU enlargement several alternative scenarios could be considered.



There are several scenarios **that** we could consider for EU enlargement.



The accession of new Member States in several stages now seems likely.



It now seems likely **that** new Member States will join in several stages.

KISS: Keep It Short and Simple

Short ...

The value of a document is not proportional to its weight. Your readers will not respect you more because you have written 100 pages instead of 20. In fact they are more likely to resent you for making such demands on their time. The Members of the Commission have repeatedly asked for documents to be more succinct, and the Secretariat General has even been known to reject over-long documents.

Some ways to cut out FOG:

1. Don't state the obvious. Trust your readers' common sense.
2. Don't clutter your text with redundant expressions like "as is well known", "it is generally accepted that", "in my personal opinion", "and so on and so forth", "both from the point of view of A and from the point of view of B".
3. Don't waste words telling readers what the text is going to say, or reminding them what it said earlier. Just say it. Once.

Shorter documents tend to have more impact, and so do shorter sentences. As a guide:

1 document = 20 pages at the most

1 sentence = 20 words

But varying sentence length makes for more interesting reading.

Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.

I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter.

Pascal

... and Simple:

English is a very rich language with a wide choice of different expressions meaning the same thing. Use simple words where possible. Simple language will not make you seem less learned or elegant: it will make you seem more credible. Foggy phrasing often reflects foggy thinking.



in view of the fact that

with respect to

a certain number of

the majority of

pursuant to

within the framework of

accordingly, consequently

for the purpose of, in order to

in the event of

if this is not the case

if this is the case

concerning, regarding

with reference to, with regard to



as

on

some

most

under

under

so

to

if

if not

if so

about

about

Simple, uncluttered style calls for the positive form, not the negative



It is **not uncommon** for applications to be rejected, so **do not complain unless** you are sure you have **not** completed yours **incorrectly**.



It is **quite common** for applications to be rejected, so **complain only if** you are sure you have completed yours **correctly**.

False friends and other pitfalls

False friends

It is understandable that we get our languages mixed up in a multilingual environment like the European Commission. Interference between French and English is particularly common. But "Frenghish" expressions which might be permissible in-house are meaningless to outside readers. They are alienating and they create FOG.

Here are some of the more common "faux amis" in Commission use:

French		
acquis communautaire	acquis	body of EU law
actuel	actual	current, topical
adéquat	adequate	suitable
assister à	assist at	attend, participate
capacité	capacity	ability, capability
compléter	complete	supplement
contrôler	control	supervise, check
disposer de	dispose of	have, keep
éventuel	eventual	any
important	important	large
matériel	material	supplies, equipment
opportunité	opportunity	advisability
pays candidats	candidates	applicant countries
pays tiers	third countries	non-member countries
perspectives	perspectives	prospects, outlook
prévu	foreseen	provided for, planned
stagiaire	stagiaire	trainee
Statut (des fonctionnaires)	Statute	Staff Regulations

Eurojargon and Eurospeak

Jargon is a language used by any group of insiders or specialists to communicate with each other in a way that cannot always be understood by outsiders. If you want outsiders to understand, don't use Eurojargon (comitology, habilitation, European construction, etc.).

Eurospeak, on the other hand, is a potentially useful language coined to describe European Union inventions and concepts which have no exact parallel at national level. There are only a few of these (e.g. subsidiarity, codecision, convergence, economic and social cohesion) and correspondingly few real excuses for using Eurospeak.

Spell it out

Keep a tight rein on abbreviations and acronyms. (ERDF + EAGGF + CAP = ZZZ). Write them out in full wherever possible.



Ignore FOG-merchants who protest: "But we've always said that!"

Now is the time to change.

References

Much of the advice given in this booklet is adapted from:

"The Plain English Guide" by Martin Cutts,
Oxford University Press, 1996

and

"Style: Toward Clarity and Grace" by Joseph M. Williams,
The University of Chicago Press, 1995

which are highly recommended.

Readers wanting more detailed information on in-house conventions for spelling, punctuation and usage should consult the **English Style Guide** produced by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) and available at http://ec.europa.eu/translation/writing/style_guides/english/index_en.htm.

Important:

All the examples of FOG in this guide are fictional. Any resemblance to any past, present or future EU document is coincidental.



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