

AN INTRODUCTION TO BETTER WRITING

Article submitted by Rebecca Erskine (GRANTfinder Head of Research)

"A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words... the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual." Mark Twain's description may seem a little over the top for our day-to-day writing but there are times in our working lives when words can make a big difference – whether it be a report that needs to convince, a presentation that needs to inform or a speech that needs to reassure.

In the world of funding, it can be the difference between securing support for a multi-million pound project and failing to bring in much-needed resource to your organisation. The project's ability to deliver the funding provider's outcomes will ultimately be the deciding factor in whether it is



chosen for support - but what happens if your application is so badly written that funders don't 'get' your message? Obtuse language and poorly-constructed sentences will frustrate time-poor funding officers and trustees to the point where your application may simply be ditched in favour of the next in the pile that just happens to be beautifully presented and well-written. If you don't pay care and attention to your application, how will you convince the funder that your attitude will be any different to managing their money?

This article aims to provide some useful tips on communicating your project in the best way:

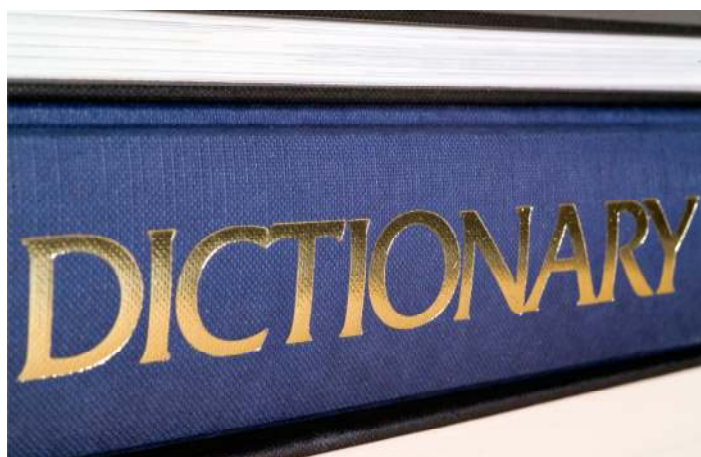
- Try to visualise the funding officer as you write. Use a style, tone and language that is dynamic and really **tells a story** about your project. Ensure the 'personality' of your project or organisation comes across.
- Your writing should have a **direction** from the beginning. Decide on one objective which is no longer than a sentence to help you stay focused.
- Limit **one idea per paragraph**. The first sentence should say what that paragraph is about.
- Use **short sentences** (15 – 20 words is usually considered the maximum). Make use of white space through displaying text as lists rather than lengthy paragraphs.
- **Remove hidden verbs**, eg 'If you would like your application to be considered...' is a lot clearer than 'If you would like consideration to be given to your application...'
- Use **language which will be familiar to your readers**. Avoid using technical jargon or acronyms if you're not 100% certain they will know what you mean.
- Use **everyday English**. Examples include: *if* instead of *in the event of*; *about* instead of *regarding*; and *more than* instead of *in excess of*.
- Where a long word and a short word mean the same thing, always **use the shorter word**. You should aim to say what you want in as few characters and words as possible. Replace *in addition* with *also*, *however* with *but* and *demonstrate* with *show*. "Short words are best and the old words when short are best of all." (Winston Churchill).
- **Beware the US English spell check!** It may change references to your *organisation* to *organization* or *centre* to *center*. Spelling-wise, they are not incorrect but use of American spellings may subconsciously distance your reader from your words.
- Readers expect copy to **be consistent** – eg e-mail, email, Email, as well as tone.

You want to give the impression your application has been put together with thought by one person rather than a mishmash of entries from different project members.

If you are submitting your application by e-mail, bear in mind the funding officer may read your words on screen. Research shows a reader assimilates information more quickly from a paper document (240 words per minute (wpm) than on-screen (200 wpm)). Also, readers *scan* text on a computer screen rather than absorbing the meaning word-for-word.

When writing an electronic document, take into account that any form of summarising such as bullets, lists or headings and other text styling, such as the use of colour and bold text, will aid document scanning.

The benefit of submitting a document electronically is being able to hyperlink to pages to offer more detail without allowing that detail to dominate your application.



FINAL CHECK

Leave your copy for at least 24 hours before editing it. Your final checklist should include the following:

- Proof read the document **word for word**. This is particularly important in order to pick up any misused words the spell check won't see, for example 'from' instead of 'form'. (It helps if you use a ruler so your eyes are not tempted to drift onto the next line.)
- Make sure **every word is serving a purpose**. Some words add nothing but length. You will usually find the word 'that' can be removed from most sentences without affecting the meaning. The words in red can be removed in the following instances: 'very important' and

'budgets have been cut **back**'.

- **Avoid distractions** such as colleagues and family, the radio or other background noise.
- **Read your words out loud**. If there is a sentence that is too long or a grammatical error, it will soon jar when you hear it.
- Read it at a time of day when you usually perform well and when your mind is clear of other concerns.
- Look for **layout mistakes** such as: inconsistencies in style and formatting (eg headings with different font sizes); 'widows' (pages beginning with the last word or line of a paragraph) and 'orphans' (paragraphs beginning on the last line of a page).
- Check for **mistakes that look normal**: eg if two numbers in your telephone code have been transposed (eg 01426 rather than 01246) or there is a missing letter from your e-mail address.
- Concentration usually lapses in the middle of a document so take a break before you tackle this section.
- If you are submitting your application in hard copy, always **print off a final copy to proof read** rather than relying on what you can see on screen. You will spot more errors that way, including any extra line spaces that may have been created by re-wording or cutting and pasting text.
- It may help to **read the text through several times** with a different aim in mind each time: for example, once for formatting issues; again for spelling and grammar; and a third time for 'readability'.

Finally, pass your application to two other people - preferably one who is familiar with the project and can check you have included all pertinent elements, and another who has no knowledge of grants. Family members and friends are worth their weight in gold here in making sure your application makes sense and that you haven't made any assumptions on knowledge.

Good writing is a discipline and can take a long time to get right. Once you have, it not only guarantees your message is better understood but also reduces the time it takes you to complete a professional piece of work.

SOME USEFUL POINTS ON GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

Apostrophes

Used for two reasons:

- To show letters are missing, eg It's a mystery.
- To show possession, Joe's patience. (The exception to the rule is 'its', which doesn't have an apostrophe when denoting possession, eg 'its foot'.)
- In some expressions of time, eg five years' postdoctoral experience as opposed to five years postdoctoral experience.

(If you're not sure whether an apostrophe is needed in this instance, try adding the word 'of' where the apostrophe is – if it still reads OK, the apostrophe should be there!)

Note: For any name ending in 's', an additional 's' tends to be missed off, eg Thomas' (rather than Thomas's) coat.

Brackets

If the text within the bracket constitutes a full sentence, the full stop should be placed within the bracket:

Example: He was afraid. (Very afraid.)

Colons and Semi-Colons

Colons are used to show something will follow.

Example:

At the end of the probationary period, customer service advisers should be able to do the following:

- Answer the telephone.
- Assist members of the public with their enquiries.

Semi-colons are used for closely related items (to represent a pause longer than comma and shorter than a full stop) and to separate items in a list.

Examples:

- The office is cold; the corridor is even colder.
- Our premises have a range of attractions: acres of well-maintained grounds;

plentiful parking; and temperature-controlled offices.

Commas

When should I use one?

In simple terms, a comma indicates a pause in a sentence.

Can I use one before the word 'and'?

Yes. It is sometimes necessary to put a comma before the word 'and'. Whilst it is not necessary in the following sentence, "I went to Dolly's Lunchbox and bought Aniseed Balls, Fizzy Cola Bottles and Flying Saucers", it is needed in this sentence: "The teams were Ali and Brian, Ricky and Natalie, and Chris and Ola."

A comma should be used in the following instances:

- Between two adjectives: He was a clever, accurate researcher.
- To separate two or more nouns: 'Please bring the report, coding form and guidelines.'
- To separate a descriptive group of words: 'Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, will chair the meeting.'
- To mark off two clauses: 'I didn't realise he was in a meeting, otherwise I would not have interrupted him.'
- To insert a thought or opinion into a sentence: 'The fuss she caused, in my opinion, was unnecessary.'

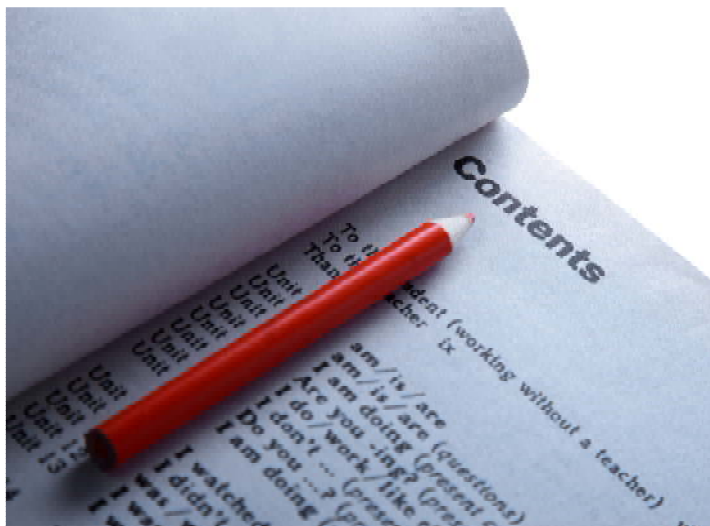
Note: it is now common practice to omit commas around words such as *therefore* and *however*. This is pretty much down to personal preference with one rule – make sure you are consistent throughout the piece of work! If, however,

therefore, *consequently* or *fortunately* occur at the beginning of a sentence, the word should be followed by a comma.

Hyphens

Generally used in the following circumstances:

- To avoid confusion. The Plain English



Campaign brings attention to the difference between a geriatric-ward nurse and a geriatric ward nurse!

- To distinguish between similar words, eg reform and re-form, resign and re-sign.
- Where words look odd without the hyphen, eg preempt.

Lists

There are two main ways in which to punctuate a list:

- A list in which each point is a complete sentence.

The findings were as follows:

- The brains of men and women work differently.
- A Wispa tastes nicer than a Bounty.

- A list which is a continuous sentence.

If you are the last person to leave at night, please:

- turn out the lights;
- switch off the printer; and
- set the alarm.

Misused Words – Common Errors

Complementary vs Complimentary

Complementary (something that completes something else or makes perfect) vs Complimentary (to pay a compliment to).

Affect vs Effect

Affect is the verb, effect is the noun.

Examples:

1. The effect of the alcohol was quite pleasant.



2. I am not affected by the tax changes.

Councillor vs Counsellor

Someone who represents the Council vs a professional offering emotional support.

Dependent vs Dependand

The dependant is the person who may be dependent on something.

Eligible vs Illegible

Can apply for v can't read/ decipher it.

ie vs eg

eg = for example.

Example: I like citrus fruits, eg oranges and limes.

(In other words, other citrus fruits exist, you're just providing examples of some of them.)

ie = literal translation is 'that is'.

Example: I like all fruits, ie I eat pretty much any fruit.

Less vs Fewer

Less is used for general amounts; fewer when the items you refer to can be counted.

Examples:

1. He has less money than the Queen. (singular)
2. We have less problems than

- before. X
- We have fewer problems than before. (plural)

Practise vs Practice

Practise is the verb, practice is the noun.

Examples:

- I practise the piano on a regular basis.
- It is good practice to brush your teeth every night.
- I am out of practice.

Principle vs Principal

Principal = Usually the adjective but can also be a noun if referring to the person in charge (eg Principal of the school).

Principle = Always a noun and usually refers to a standard, law or rule.

Example:

- The principal trainer taught me how to use GRANTfinder.
- He has no principles.

Stationary vs Stationery

Not going anywhere/not moving **vs** the office variety (think envelopes).

Paragraphs

A new paragraph either:

- denotes a new subject; or
- indicates a slight change in direction on the same subject.

Singular and Plural

None (abbreviation for not one) = singular, eg None of our customers has complained.

With collective nouns, the singular should be used if the emphasis is on the group as a unit but plural if the emphasis is on the components that make up the group.

Examples:

- The Government has published its Bill. (singular).
- The Team was winning (because there is

- only one team).
- The team members were delighted (because there are several team members).

FURTHER READING

If you are interested in finding out more, take a look at:

- o The Economist Style Guide. This guide is based on the style book given to all journalists at *The Economist* magazine: <http://www.economist.com/research/styleguide/>. Its standards are recommended by the National Council for the Training of Journalists.
- o The Plain English Campaign. This organisation fights for plain English in public communication and has a number of useful guides at <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html> – including *A-Z of Alternative Words* and *Writing Business Emails*.
- o *Eats Shoots and Leaves - The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss.
- o The 'Readability Statistics' option on Microsoft Word (located in Tools). It scans a document to identify the average word count per sentence and average character count per word, as well as your percentage of passive sentences. (The percentage score of well-trained writers is 0-25%.)

