



Harborough District Council

Style Guide

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Harborough District Council Style Guide

Keeping council communications simple and straightforward

First edition: 2007

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As well as written communication, there is also visual communication - please refer to the ***Harborough District Council Branding Guidelines***, which gives you guidance on the use of the main elements of our visual identity. This includes the way the council's logo is used.

The key to success of a visual identity is that it is used consistently and without exception throughout the council.

The ***Branding Guidelines*** can also be viewed on the intranet from the front page

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Introduction

'If we all wrote in plain English how much easier – and efficient – life would be. It is no exaggeration to describe plain English as a fundamental tool of good Government.'

Baroness Thatcher

The way we present our services and ourselves is second in importance only to the quality of those services. That is why Harborough District Council has a style guide.

The style guide covers consistent use of things like capital letters, punctuation and other layout features throughout our communications.

We should also make sure that everything we write is clear and easy to understand. Whether it is a letter to a member of the public, a report for members or a memo to other officers, our writing must be so clear that no reader can make a mistake about its meaning.

This is sometimes difficult. Often, without thinking, we write long complicated sentences and use official words or jargon to put across our message. We risk confusing our readers and it reflects badly on Harborough District Council, making us seem remote and unfriendly. We can help prevent this if we follow some simple rules!

Our contact details

Our name

Harborough District Council is a single organisation, we should write 'Harborough District Council is...' and not 'Harborough District Council are... '.

We should always use 'Harborough District Council'. However, after the first reference to Harborough District Council, we can use 'the district council' or 'the council' or 'HDC' if necessary.

'The' is not part of our name, so we should use 'Harborough District Council', not 'the Harborough District Council'.

We can also cause confusion if we use 'Harborough', or 'the local authority'.

Our address

People need to know who they are dealing with, so we need to include 'Harborough District Council' in our address, eg:

Communications Team
Harborough District Council
Adam and Eve Street
Market Harborough
Leicestershire LE16 7AG

Telephone numbers

When writing our telephone numbers we can help by giving the number and STD code separated by a space, eg:

01858 821014

For clarity, when using the general call centre number, we should separate the numbers as follows:

01858 82 82 82

Email addresses

Don't forget to include your e-mail address on correspondence.

email addresses are usually all in lower case, eg:

b.jones@harborough.gov.uk

Glossary

Abbreviation

A shortened form of a word or phrase (Jan instead of January).

Acronym

A word formed from initial letters pronounced as a word (Mori, Aids).

Active sentences

Where you write the doer before the verb. “Sarah wrote the report” is active. “The report was written by Sarah” is passive.

Apostrophe (')

Used to either show the absence of letters (can't) or to indicate possession (Linda's book).

Cliché

A common or overused phrase, word or opinion.

Dash

A dash (–) is twice as long as a hyphen. It is used to separate a clause in a sentence – like this – and gives a clearer, longer break than commas.

Headers and footers

Headers and footers are areas in the top and bottom margins of

each page in a document.

Hyphen

Hyphens (-) are used to join words together so that they are read as one (for example, pre-school)

Jargon

Words used that are difficult for others to understand. Often jargon only means something to those 'on the inside'.

Passive sentences

Where the subject of the sentence receives the action of the verb. “Jones was arrested by the police” is passive. “Police arrest Jones” is active.

Plain English

Communicating in a clear, understandable and user-friendly way.

Quotation marks

Double quotation marks (“...”) for quotes and direct speech. Single (‘...’) for a quote within a quote.

Widows and orphans

Single lines of text that appear at the beginning or end of a page when a paragraph is split.

Writing in plain English

The aim of this section is to provide you with simple tips for writing clear, concise English. The key points covered are:

- Keeping words and sentences short
- The right tone
- Avoiding clichés and jargon
- Keeping sentences active

Introduction

What is plain English?

Plain English is about clear communication. It means writing so the reader understands what you are saying the first time they read it.

Writing in plain English is not about ‘dumbing’ down. Nor does it mean having to change the meaning of your message. It is about writing so you cannot be misunderstood.

Writing in plain English means you keep your sentences short, avoid council jargon, and use an active voice. It’s as simple as that.

Keeping words and sentences short

People switch off if they see line upon line of long words, long sentences or both. Think of what you are trying to say and then say it. Don’t waffle.

Always try to cut the number of words you use. Short sentences make clearer reading. They also reduce misunderstanding.

If you stick to the following simple principles, you will be able to write fewer and shorter words:

- Never use a long word if a short one will do
- If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out
- Aim for your sentences to be a maximum of 20 to 25 words in length
- Remember what you are trying to say; be specific and avoid long descriptive sentences
- Break up long sentences into more manageable chunks
- Sentences can start with the words ‘And’ or ‘But’
- Always remember your audience; will people outside the council – in effect the public – really understand what you are saying?

Example

- × The theatre has seating for 600 people
- ✓ The theatre seats 600

- × They accepted employment on a part-time basis
- ✓ They accepted part-time work

Cutting long sentences doesn't mean that you have to make every sentence the same length. Quite the opposite. Be creative. Vary your writing so that you have a mix of mid-length and short sentences.

The right tone

A key aspect of successful communication is the tone you use. The tone of your writing will tell people about Harborough District Council's attitude to its customers. Using the right tone will help give people a positive image of the council. They will understand what you are saying. But the wrong tone can have a massive effect on how your message is perceived – because the reader will react negatively to the way you speak.

Tone tips

- Your tone must not be unsympathetic or make your readers anxious
- Give your writing a little charm – make it sound friendly and caring but don't patronise the reader
- Use the words 'I', 'you' or 'we'. It makes your tone of voice more personal and sincere
- Avoid any language that might offend people
- Use everyday spoken language not formal jargon
- If you have to write a negative letter, be gracious and understanding, not imposing

Avoid Clichés

Try to avoid clichés. Clichés are a convenient way of expressing a familiar idea. But they are dangerous in writing because of that familiarity.

Common clichés are:

- At this point in time
- Level playing field
- Learning curve
- At the end of the day
- The tip of the iceberg
- Back to the drawing board

People are more likely to understand and absorb a message if it is communicated in a fresh and original way. Because a cliché is so familiar, the reader can easily ignore what you are trying to say. For this reason, clichés are best avoided.

Jargon

Jargon should be avoided. It serves a purpose in communication between people who share certain knowledge. But it excludes anyone who is not part of that select group. Always think about your

audience. If they might be unfamiliar with a word or phrase, look for a simpler alternative. Formal or legalistic language never communicates clearly. Try to use the language of everyday speech, preferring specific, concrete words.

For example:

Don't say	Possible meaning	Prefer
stakeholder	someone who is nervous around vampires	people
wheeled refuse container	an object refusing to go on wheels	bin
the authority	someone with the right to enforce obedience	the council
benchmark	a blemish on a park bench	standard or guide
dwelling	someone who is preoccupied	house, home or where you live
members	people who belong to a club	councillors

See page 32 for more words and phrases to be avoided.

Keeping sentences active

According to the Plain English Campaign (www.plainenglish.co.uk),

active sentences are crisp and professional, passive sentences are stuffy and bureaucratic.

To make a sentence active you need to:

- put the doer (the person, group or thing doing the action), before the verb (the action itself)
- use 'I', 'you' and 'we'
- reduce the number of redundant or wasteful words
- avoid the verb 'to be' in all its forms

The Plain English Campaign says it's easier to write active sentences once you've understood how a sentence fits together. It adds that there are three main parts to every sentence:

- the doer (the person, group or thing doing the action);
- a verb (the action itself); and
- an object (the person, group or thing that the action is done to)

So, if the sentence is 'Dave wrote the report':

- the doer is Dave (he did the report);
- the verb is wrote; and
- the object is the report (it had been written)

To make a sentence active, simply put the three parts in the following order: doer, verb, object. An active sentence would read 'Dave wrote the report'.

In passive sentences, the order is different: object, verb, doer. So the sentence would read 'the report was written by Dave'.

Example

- × Your bin will be collected by the council on a Monday
- ✓ We will collect your bin every Monday

- × The new policy has been reviewed by the scrutiny panel
- ✓ Our scrutiny panel reviewed the new policy

- × A meeting will be held by directors next week
- ✓ The directors meet next week

Harborough District Council house style

The aim of this section is to show you the council's house style of writing. The key points covered are:

- The need for a house style
- The elements of our house style

The need for a house style

Our house style is designed to ensure everyone who writes to or for the public does so in a consistent way. We look confused and unprofessional if our language is not consistent. If you use clear, concise language, your readers are more likely to believe that you are being honest and open.

The elements of our house style

This section has been broken up into several key areas, covering all aspects of our house style. It shows the specific rules that you need to follow when writing for Harborough District Council.

Abbreviations

Unless a word is universally known in its abbreviated form, for example DVDs, using abbreviations can look unprofessional and is a lazy way of writing.

Abbreviations should be spelt out in capitals with no punctuation, such as TUC, NSPCC, BBC. Unless an abbreviation is so familiar that it is used more often than the full form, write the words in full on first appearance, with the abbreviation in brackets after, for example British Aerospace (BAe).

Try not to use the same set of initials over and over again. Vary your words. You could write 'the company/council/organisation' instead, using lower case.

It would not be necessary to explain familiar initials to, say, an industry audience. But remember, if you are writing a report, while part of your audience may be aware what the initials stand for, this may not be so for everyone.

Don't use	Replace with
ie	in other words, or that is
eg	for example
Jan, Feb, Nov	January, February, November
&	and (unless the '&' is used in the name of something, for example, Marks & Spencer).
/	and/or

Acronyms

Acronyms are abbreviations of phrases or names, usually composed of the first letters of all the important words in the phrase or name. Acronyms are almost always pronounced as words themselves, as in UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund).

Acronyms should not contain full stops, because they would interfere with the pronunciation of the word. All the letters of an acronym can be capitals, even when they aren't normally capitalised in the full spelling of the word (as in UNICEF above). Occasionally an acronym crosses over into becoming a word itself (radar and laser are good examples) and then it becomes unnecessary to capitalise the letters.

Alternative formats

Newsletters, leaflets and reports should contain details of alternative formats - 'A large print format of this xxxxx can be made available on request, as can other language versions, please contact us on 01858 82 82 82'.

Bold, italics and underlining

Moderation is the key for all. Long, italicised paragraphs can look dated. Too many italicised words upset the flow and can confuse the reader.

The same warning applies to bold type. As a general rule, don't use it too much. Used sparingly, bold type can help the reader to identify subject changes. It can give the printed page visual interest.

Underlining paragraphs of text does not add stress or emphasis to what you are trying to say. Always use moderation if you need to use bold, italics or underlining.

Capitals

Councils tend to over-capitalise words to make them sound more important. But too many capitals spoil the appearance of a page.

NEVER WRITE SENTENCES LIKE THIS, IN BLOCK CAPITALS – THEY ARE TOO DIFFICULT TO READ.

Use italics rather than capitals if you want to emphasise a word or phrase.

Here are some situations that often cause confusion about whether to use capital letters or not:

Headings: Always write headlines and headings in lower case (after the first initial capital letter). The only exception to this is if there is a name within the heading.

Government: The Government, when referring to the Government of the country, needs a capital letter. So do political parties, such as the Labour group, Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party.

Jobs: Generic job titles should be written in lower case (administrator, surveyor, councillor, head of service). Individuals' titles, such as Communications Officer should have initial capitals.

Seasons and events: Use lower case for spring, summer, autumn and winter. But use initial capitals for religious festivals such as Easter. Use lower case for new year but use capitals for New Year's Day or New Year's Eve.

The council: Harborough District Council needs initial capitals, but 'the council' does not. Never describe the council as 'the authority' or 'the Local Authority'.

The titles of established council groups should have initial capitals (Scrutiny Panel). But when talking about scrutiny committees in general, without referring to specific ones, lower case is fine.

When showing contact details, the words 'email' and 'internet' do not need capital letters.

Dates and times

Dates should be written with the number only and not with any additional letters, eg 28 February 2006 rather than 28th February 2006.

The date and the year should be split by the month to give clarity.

Times are written without a space between the figure and am or pm. So it is 8.30am or 8am. Do not put noughts after the figure (8.00am), as this does nothing but take up more space. Do not write times with a colon (:) between the hour and minutes (8:30). Do not write in the 24-hour clock style.

Document versions

Versions and file names of documents should be inserted into the footer (see Headers and footers). Some, or all, of the following should be included:

- The filename
- The directory where the original is stored
- The author
- The date
- Page numbers - it is best to put page x of x, so readers of a long document can be sure there are no pages missing in what they are reading.
- The version number - if more than one version (drafts) of any document exists, it is essential to know whether you are reading the latest version or not.

Headers and footers

Headers and footers are areas in the top and bottom margins (margin: the blank space outside the printing area on a page) of each page in a document.

You can insert text or graphics in headers and footers: for example, page numbers, the date, a company logo, the document's title or file name, or the author's name, that are printed at the top or bottom of each page in a document.

You can work in the header and footer areas in Word by clicking Header and Footer on the View menu.

See also ***Document Versions***

Fonts and type size

Our principal typefaces are Times New Roman and Arial. These are available in a range of weights (bold, italic etc.) and should be used in all printed literature and stationery.

Type size is measured in units called 'points'. Try to aim for a font size of 12 point. If you are pushed for space, you can go down to 10 point. The Royal National Institute of the Blind recommend a minimum of 14 point if the readers could be visually impaired. For headings, use a font size at least two points bigger than the body text.

Glossaries

Glossaries should be included in documents and reports as appropriate.

Numbers

Single numbers from one to nine are usually spelt out in full, while figures are used for 10 upwards. Always use figures with commas and decimal points. Spell out large numbers if necessary, eg: one million, instead of 1,000,000.

Telephone numbers do not need brackets for the area code. They should read 01858 not (01858).

Don't start a sentence with a figure, spell it out.

Don't use k as an abbreviation for thousands.

When writing percentages, the word 'per cent' should be used, rather than using %. However if you are using tables or listing figures the symbol can be used.

Photographs and illustrations

Good quality photographs and illustrations can help lift a document and break up large expanses of text. Avoid using clip art, it looks

unprofessional. Instead use photographic images, illustrations, diagrams or flow charts to help illustrate a point.

Remember to include captions to photographs, illustrations, tables and diagrams where necessary.

Don't forget to get permission to reproduce pictures or diagrams from other people's publications if they are in copyright.

Be aware that if you intend to reproduce photos of children or vulnerable adults you must follow the procedure set out in the HDC Policy for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults.

Publication and revision dates

A publication date and a revision date should be put at the bottom of leaflets. The revision date is usually 12 months from the publication date.

Text alignment

Corporate style uses left-aligned text, ie it is aligned to the left margin and has a ragged right margin. This document uses left-aligned text. It is less formal than justified text and eliminates the need for hyphenation. This is in line with good practice under the Disability Discrimination Act, as justified text creates ribbons of

white space making it harder to read.

If you are using columns, the text should also be left aligned. But don't forget to right-align whole numbers and use decimal tabs to align decimals.

Widows and orphans

Widows and orphans are single lines of text that appear at the beginning or end of a page when a paragraph has split between two pages or columns. These should be avoided because they interrupt the flow of text for the reader.

Microsoft Office Word has a good help facility if you need assistance with this - look under Control Pagination.

Punctuation

We all have our own style of punctuation, but the general rule is to use just enough for clarity. It helps to keep sentences short, so that punctuation is kept to a minimum. Long, involved sentences can confuse the reader, even if they are grammatically correct.

The most straightforward approach to punctuation is to read a sentence aloud to yourself and add punctuation to express the pauses you would make if speaking.

Apostrophes

Use an apostrophe to show that a letter is missing, eg:

It's no concern of mine.

Be careful not to confuse *it's* (a contraction of *it is*) with the possessive *its*, which does not contain an apostrophe. eg:

It's a matter of concern to the school and its pupils.

Use an apostrophe to show possession, eg:

the people's friend

the three inspectors' reports.

Be careful where you put the apostrophe when there is more than one possessor. Compare, for example 'the applicant's forms' with 'the applicants' forms'. In the first phrase there is one applicant who

has two or more forms. In the second there is more than one applicant and each has one or more forms.

Remember when showing possession by a person whose name ends with an s, that you don't need to add an additional 's, eg:

John Jones' memorandum

It is not necessary to use an apostrophe to show the plural of abbreviations, eg PCs, P60s, 1990s.

To make a plural possessive, first make the word plural in its normal way, eg:

trainer	trainers
boss	bosses
child	children

Then make the word possessive, eg:

The trainers' comments (more than one trainer, each making comments)

The bosses' recommendations (more than one boss, each having recommendations)

The children's nanny (the word children does not end with an s, so add an apostrophe s)

Punctuation (continued)

Use apostrophes to indicate that text already found within quotation marks is a quote itself (quotes within quotes), eg:

“She claims the photocopier ‘blew up’ when she added the toner”, Mark explained.

There is no apostrophe in the plurals of groups of letters and numbers (for the plural it is MPs, not MP’s, 1990s, not 1990’s. But the apostrophe does indicate the plural of single letters (A’s and B’s, P’s and Q’s).

Bullet points

Bulleted sentences don’t need semi-colons after them. An exception is lists in formal legal texts, where meaning can be made certain by more elaborate punctuation.

Items in bulleted lists that are complete sentences themselves require full stops (or question marks or exclamation marks) at the end, eg:

I have always liked studying the Civil War for several reasons:

- I think it is fascinating that the country almost split apart.
- I enjoy the stories about Robert E. Lee and Ulysses Grant.

- I admire the young soldiers who risked everything for their side.

Items that are not complete sentences by themselves do not require any punctuation, eg:

I have always liked studying the Civil War for several reasons:

- country almost split apart
- stories about Robert E. Lee and Ulysses Grant
- young soldiers who risked everything for their side

No punctuation is needed to end a bulleted list (unless that last item is a complete sentence itself).

Colons

There are three ways to use a colon:

- to introduce a list (as in the statement above)
- to say ‘here comes some important news’, eg:
In the end everyone was surprised: the couple moved to Australia
- to separate two closely related but contrasting statements, eg:
Empowerment: a risk worth taking.

Punctuation (continued)

When a colon is used to introduce a bulleted list, capitalise the first letter of each item that is itself a complete sentence, eg:

The dress is available in three colours:

- Red is our top seller.
- Green is the most popular with teenagers.
- Blue is our classic colour.

When a colon is used to introduce a list, and the items themselves are not complete sentences, it is up to you whether you capitalise the first letter or not, but be consistent.

Commas

Use commas as separators where a short pause is needed - perhaps where you would pause briefly if speaking. Try not to use more than two or three commas in a sentence: split it up in other ways instead, or start a new sentence.

Pairs of commas are used to show where something extra has been put in, eg:

The guest speaker, Sarah Jones, kept the audience spellbound for a full hour.

Use a comma to mark off thousands in numbers of one thousand or

more when shown in figures, eg:

1,255

45,199

305,702

Exclamation marks

An exclamation mark (!) expresses surprise or alarm. It is hardly ever necessary to use one. If you do need to use an exclamation mark, never end a sentence with more than one.

Full stops

A full stop normally shows that a sentence has ended. If the subject changes or the sentence is getting long or complex, use a full stop and begin another sentence.

Use a full stop rather than a question mark to end an indirect question, eg: She asked when the proof would be ready.

Hyphens and dashes

A hyphen (-) is half the length of a dash (–). Don't get the two mixed up when using a hyphen within a word. There is a tendency for people to over-hyphenate words. As a useful tool, a good dictionary will let you know if a word needs a hyphen or not.

Punctuation (continued)

Hyphens link words that together form one adjective, eg:

short-term goal
out-of-hours work
a six-year-old child
a four-day wait

There are no spaces either side of the hyphen. Don't use a hyphen in a phrase including an adverb (a word often ending in *-ly* that describes a verb) eg 'rapidly growing economy'.

Clarity is the key. The following two examples illustrate the potential confusion when an adverb is taken for an adjective and vice versa:

'an ill, educated man' and 'an ill-educated man'

'a long-lost ruler' means that the ruler has been lost for a long time, whereas 'a long lost ruler' means that the ruler is both long and lost.

Use a hyphen to indicate a range of numbers, dates and page numbers, eg:

1988-2000
pages 11-23

Hyphens are also used to distinguish a less common pronunciation

or meaning of a word from its more customary usage, eg:

a recreation hall a re-creation of a scene
to recover from an illness re-cover the sofa

Dashes are useful in emails and informal notes to mark an abrupt change in thought or grammatical construction in the middle of a sentence – they help to break up sentences like natural speech. Single dashes are also useful in formal documents – for example, in the previous sentence – while a pair of dashes can help to cordon off an aside or explanation that you wish to highlight (as in this sentence). Used in pairs, they are thus an alternative to brackets or pairs of commas.

To type a dash, press Ctrl + dash (between the 0 and = keys on the numbers bar along the keyboard). Most people need to set their keyboards up to type a dash in Microsoft Word. Follow the simple steps on the next page to set it up:

Setting up a dash in Microsoft Word:

1. Select insert from the menu bar and then symbols
2. Select Special Character
3. Select En Dash
4. Select shortcut key
5. Highlight existing text (under current keys) and select remove
6. Under 'press new shortcut key', press Ctrl - (or your own choice)
7. Assign and close

To use the dash, simply press the Ctrl - keys together.

Question marks

A question mark shows that a sentence asking a question has ended, eg: "Have you seen Mark recently?"

Use a question mark at the end of a question, even if you are not expecting a reply, eg: "Can you believe what he said?"

Quotation marks

Be consistent when using quotation marks. Use double ("...") quotation marks for quotes and to report direct speech. Use single ('...') quotation marks for a quote within a quote or a quote within direct speech.

Pay careful attention to the position of commas and quotation marks in direct speech, eg:

"This simple grants scheme has helped smaller groups gain lottery funding for the first time," said Culture Secretary Chris Smith, "and these awards give local communities a tremendous opportunity to celebrate the millennium in their own village or town."

When only part of a sentence is being quoted, the position of the commas change, eg:

Chris Smith called it a "simple grants scheme", recommending it to local communities as "a tremendous opportunity".

If direct speech or a quotation consists of two or more consecutive paragraphs, use double quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph, but place them at the end of the last paragraph only.

Avoid using single quotation marks to emphasise words. Where appropriate, use italics instead to make the text look less cluttered.

Book titles should be typed in italics, with no quotation marks, and only the first word (and any proper names) should have a capital letter.

Semi-colons

The semi-colon serves two useful purposes. It can take the place of a full stop to link what would otherwise be two closely related sentences, eg:

We have studied this problem for several days; more work is necessary.

It can also be used to separate long or possibly ambiguous items in a series, especially when the items already include commas, eg:

The elected officers are John Smith, President; Sarah Jones, Vice President; Edward Morris, Secretary; and Susan Pope, Treasurer.

Note that a final semi-colon is used before the *and* that introduces the last item.

Spacing

After full stops

Use only one space after full stops. Proportional fonts have built-in space which varies depending on the individual font and characters used. This is why only a single space needs to be inserted after a

full stop. It also looks more professional to use a single space after a full stop. Typesetters and printers use only a single space.

Between lines of text

The spacing between lines of text is called *leading* (pronounced *ledding*). Leading needs to be sufficiently well spaced so that the lower strokes of characters on one line of text do not overlap with the upper strokes of characters on the following line. Otherwise the text can be difficult to read, particularly for people who may be visually impaired. The bigger the text, the larger the leading needs to be.

If you use single line spacing in Word, the leading will be adjusted automatically to suit the text size.

It is particularly important for large-print documents to have adequate leading, so consider using 1.5 line spacing for large print.

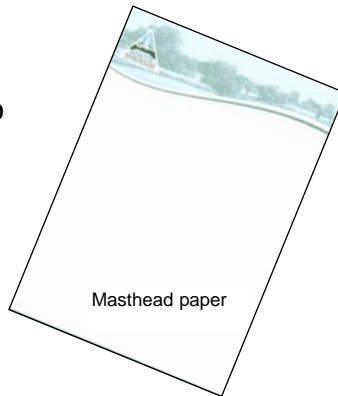
Below headings

Avoid using large amounts of space between headings and subsequent paragraphs of text, otherwise they don't look as if they belong together.

Document layout

Stationery templates

- Templates are available for letters, memos, faxes, emails and reports. These are saved in W/File/New/General. The letter template you use depends on your service area. There are letter templates for all Heads of Service and for the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and Strategic Director.
- Letterhead paper should be used for all external letters and faxes. Letterhead paper is available from the Print Room.
- Compliment slips should be used when sending a document externally. You should always sign a compliment slip, and give your contact details if you require the reader to reply.
- Business cards can be printed for those who need them.
- Masthead paper can be used for posters/front pages of documents. Masthead paper is available from the Print



Room. Or alternatively templates are available in W/File/New/Mastheads

Letters - presentation

- Our principal typefaces are Times New Roman and Arial. These are available in a range of weights (bold, italic etc.)
- Type size is measured in units called 'points'. Try to aim for a font size of 12 point. If you are pushed for space, you can go down to 10 point.
- Don't indent paragraphs.
- Use one space after full stop.
- Check your spelling by reading through the document as well as using the 'spellcheck' function.
- Include a comma in the salutation and sign off.
- Sign off 'Yours sincerely' when you know the person's name eg: Dear Mrs. Smith.
- Sign off 'Yours faithfully' when you don't know the person's name eg: Dear Sir/Madam.
- Letters should be kept to one page if possible.

Letters - getting the basics right

- Use plain language
- Plan your letter before you start - it saves time and helps you focus on how you will successfully respond to a query.
- The opening of a business letter can be the hardest part to write. It should grab the reader's attention and persuade them to go on reading. It should also set the tone for the letter, without giving away all the information in later paragraphs. Where possible thank the person for their letter or phone call, or their help with information provided.
- If you are writing a letter with bad news, it is more likely to leave a positive impression with the customer if the reasons for the decision are explained, with honesty and without jargon or an impersonal resort to 'policy' or 'procedure'.
- Don't apologise too much. If there are good reasons for the decision there is nothing to apologise for. It is polite, however, to express regret at not being able to help in the way requested.
- If you are writing a letter requesting someone to do something for the council – such as fill out a form, or provide proof of

something – it will be more likely to be successful if you tell them what benefit their action will bring them. Keep in mind that they might be busy, and need a reason to do things for you. You need to make them aware of how it will help them.

- Always remember that the logical structure of your letter is very important. If you want the person to fill in a form, attach a document and return the form by a certain date, put your requirements in the right order. Make them as clear as possible – bullet points forming a checklist are a good way to make it easy for people to tick off the steps as they go. Tell them if you have included a pre-paid envelope, or if the call you want them to make is free.

Emails

- Make certain your reader prefers receiving your messages via email as opposed to regular mail or by fax. And when you need to persuade your reader, consider a personal visit or a phone call instead of (or along with) an email message.
- Guard the reputation of your screen name. People perform a quick preliminary sort of their incoming email on a daily basis, so if they have received junk emails from you in the past, they won't

be quick to open your emails in the future. So don't get a reputation for sending junk emails.

- Give emails a clear subject heading that contains a summary of the most important information your reader needs. If you give your email a subject heading of, for example, *Notes of last meeting* - the reader doesn't know straight away what meeting the email is referring to. If the subject heading had been *Notes of Communication meeting 4.12.06*, the reader would have known straight away.
- Giving emails clear subject headings makes it easier to find saved emails.
- Get to the point within the opening screen, this helps the reader to read the email quickly without having to scroll down.
- Use the same style rules for email as you would for a conventional letter; check the spelling, don't use CAPITALS for all letters, form complete sentences and use proper punctuation.

Faxes

A fax cover sheet should be used either as the only page or as the first page if more than one page is faxed.

The fax cover sheet template is saved in W/File/New/General/Fax sheet.

You should always insert the number of pages on the cover sheet so that when the fax is received the reader knows there are no pages missing.

Reports

Templates are available for various reports. These are saved in W/File/New/General.

Clear Print Guidelines

Communicating with the visually impaired

Where your target audience may have reading difficulties or be visually impaired, it may be useful to consider the following issues. This section is not to be used as a definitive and authoritative guide to designing for visually impaired users, but it is intended to bring awareness to the many related issues. For current and up-to-date information, please refer to material produced by professional bodies such as the Royal National Institute of the Blind (www.rnib.org.uk).

Paper

Avoid using glossy paper as this can reflect too much light and produce glare. It may be better to specify a paper with a matt finish. Additionally, do not use paper that is too thin where text printed on the reverse is likely to show through.

Contrast

An important factor in print legibility is the contrast between text and paper on which it is printed. Always ensure that there is adequate contrast by using dark text on pale backgrounds or vice versa. Avoid strong or dark coloured papers where contrast is likely to be poor.

Type size

The RNIB generally suggest that type must not be less than 12 point, but prefer a minimum value of 14 point.

Spacing

Do not condense or stretch lines of text. The RNIB recommend that text paragraphs be left aligned, not justified, and that there should be clear space between paragraphs or columns of text. Avoid splitting words at the end of lines (hyphenation).

Images

Make sure that images have suitable contrast, and do not rely on them being essential to communicate a message. Avoid running type over an image as this can have a varying degree of contrast.

Navigational aids

Make sure that navigational aids are clearly and consistently displayed between pages. Always have a clear and simple contents page with identifiable hierarchy of content.

General

When designing application forms or questionnaires, make sure that a generous amount of space is available for the user to enter details. Visually impaired users tend to have large handwriting.

Writing for the website

Introduction

A growing number of people visit our web pages every year. In 2005/06 nearly two million pages were viewed on our website:

www.harborough.gov.uk.

That's over half a million more than the previous year.

Our website is the fastest and most popular way for people to find out about the council. It gives people the information they want

quickly and effortlessly. Because of this, people tend to speed-read websites, flicking through pages in search of the information they want.

But our website has a much more important role to play. It's not just a reference manual. It engages the council and our residents, helping to develop local democracy. People can find information on everything the council does. This may be planning applications, press releases, minutes from council meetings, details of their local councillors and much more.



Our plain English and council house style rules still apply to our website. But there are some crucial extra considerations when writing for website users.

The differences between web writing and printed documents

People do not read web pages in the same way as they do a printed document:

- They read web pages more slowly
- They tend to scan text, rather than read it
- They often don't read things in order

Because of this you need to write web pages differently from printed pages:

- A web page will have around 50 per cent fewer words than its printed counterpart
- Always structure your articles, writing your big idea first
- Write short paragraphs with one idea in each

Key techniques for successful web writing

As with any printed document, good writing is easier to read and

understand. Writing for a website is no exception. But unlike printed documents, online communication must always be appealing to the eye. Its layout needs to help people quickly find what they are looking for. Graphics should be kept to a minimum.

Getting started

Always start your page with a brief summary of the main point you are trying to make. This will let the reader know if the page is what they are looking for (see example below).

Example

Council tax

Council tax is made up of four elements:

1. a charge by Harborough District Council for services
2. the charge made by town and parish councils
3. a police authority charge
4. a fire authority charge

The total council tax charge for each property will vary depending on its location. Full details of the charge in 2006/07 for individual price bands within each town and parish in Harborough District can be found below:

Structuring a page

Always write in plain English and stick to the council's house style.

Here are some important extra rules for writing online:

- Give each page a clear, short title that tells people what the page is about
- Write text in small chunks and turn long printed articles into shorter pages; people won't want to scroll down very far
- Always use sub-headings throughout the page to guide the reader
- Use bullet points to split text up
- Provide links on every page to other relevant pages on the site
- Always align the text to the left

Content

Keep the content of your web pages up to date. This means making sure the pages contain the most current information. The front page of www.harborough.gov.uk is updated regularly. As a guide always check the following:

Dates: Check if any of your content has dates in it that may have expired. Avoid writing 'tomorrow' 'next week' or 'yesterday' as these will be immediately out of date after the event.

Legislation: Ensure where appropriate your pages meet or refer to all current acts, legislations and regulations. When new ones are brought out make sure you update your web pages accordingly.

Language: Keep an eye on the language used on your web pages and change words if you feel they are no longer suitable. For example the term 'old age pensioner' or 'OAP' was once commonplace. Today it's considered offensive. Someone could be receiving a pension but still be relatively young in age. Dropping the 'old age' part and simply using the word 'pensioner' is less likely to cause offence.

Contact details: Always make sure the names and contact details of people named on your web pages are up to date. Remember that people will leave jobs or get married and change their surnames. Check email addresses and phone numbers regularly.

Hyperlinks: Check that hyperlinks on your web pages still take the reader to the intended relevant pages.

Latest events: Most websites will have sections explaining the 'latest' issues. For our website this may be future council meetings or the latest events on our 'what's on' pages. Ensure pages like these remain updated.

Navigation and usability

Links

A website is fast and easy to use because it lets people jump from one page to another at the click of a button. And our site is no exception. Nearly every page on www.harborough.gov.uk has a link on it to other related pages.

Always include, wherever possible, links from your web pages.

These will:

- Help the reader find what they are looking for quickly
- Reduce the need to have long pages of text
- Inform the reader of all other relevant pages available

When inserting a hyperlink ensure that the text used for the link describes where the person will be taken. For example, a link to the BBC website should read [BBC website](#), rather than www.bbc.co.uk.

For an internal link make the link into a sentence. For example, write 'please visit our [refuse collection pages](#).' Never write '[More information](#)' or '[Link to...](#)'. If the reader doesn't know where they are going, they won't use the link.

Website accessibility

All visitors, regardless of any level of disability or the standard of technology they have, must be able to use our website. To ensure your pages meet accessibility standards you need to consider a few things:

- Any images used must have an alternative text that appears when the mouse hovers over the image. This helps text-based browsers and people with visual impairments.
- Ensure all Portable Document Format (PDF) attachments have their file size included in the web page link. This enables people to gauge how long the document will take to download. File sizes should not exceed 500kb (kilobyte).
- When a PDF file is inserted, an explanation of the document is needed. Instructions for people to download an Adobe Acrobat reader are also needed with a hyperlink to the Adobe website.

Example

Note: The report is provided in Portable Document Format (PDF) and therefore requires a suitable reader to view it. A reader can be downloaded free from the [Adobe website](#) (full instructions for downloading the reader are provided on the site).

Conclusion

It is fairly easy to write. But it's much harder to communicate. This guide should have helped you to write successfully. Whether you write reports, letters to the public or content for our website pages –what you say, and how you say it, matters.

This style guide has also, hopefully, inspired you to consider your own writing style. Does your writing sound bureaucratic, official or, even worse, incomprehensible and confusing?

There is one simple way to answer these questions – would you speak to people in the style and tone that you write?

If the answer is no, you need to change your style. You'll see the results immediately.

The council exists to serve local people. And, ultimately, our residents pay for us through their council tax. Using clear and concise language means they are more likely to believe that you are being honest and open. And if we can't easily let people know what we are doing and why, we aren't providing the best quality service that we should.

Appendix: Meaningless words and phrases

Here are some typical council words and phrases. They are overbearing and give a poor impression of the council's attitude to its customers. Avoid using them. Next to these are shorter, more readable alternatives.

Words to avoid

Don't say	Prefer
advise	tell
applicant	you
commence	start or begin
complete	fill in
concerning	about or on
endeavour	try
facilitate	ease or help
forthwith	now or at once
implement	begin

Don't say	Prefer
irrespective of	despite
lighting column	lamp post
local authority	council or we
notwithstanding	apart from or aside from
per annum	a year
persons	people
reimburse	refund
remuneration	fee or pay
requirement	need
supplementary	more or extra
terminate	end
utilise	use

Phrases to avoid

Don't say	Prefer
enhancement works will be undertaken	we'll be repairing
I am of the opinion that	I believe
In accordance with	under
In acknowledgement of your letter dated the 4 October 2006	thank you for your letter of 4 October 2006
In excess of	more than
In order to	to
I write in reference to	I'm writing to you about
I write to inform you	I'm writing to you about
not less than	at least
on a monthly basis	monthly
on receipt of	when we, or you, get
payment shall commence on a monthly basis	you'll pay monthly

Don't say	Prefer
persons must send back the checklist record for our retention	please return the form to us
should you wish	if you want
the council is in receipt of	we have received
under rule 312 of the Land Registration Rules 1925	by law
undertakes the processing of	processes
until such time	until
with regard to	about
your objections have been duly noted	we've received your objections