# Learning from linguistics: structuring our sentences sensitively

**Sarah Carr BA (Hons) MBA**
Freelance writer, editor and proofreader, Associate, Plain Language Commission, Bereavement support volunteer
sarahcarr@carrconsultancy.co.uk

**Broader Horizons** is an occasional series of articles focussing on related fields of relevance to bereavement or to those who care for bereaved people. This article by Sarah Carr is a companion to the article in ***Bereavement Care***, Winter 2015 which looked at how concepts from plain language can help us communicate clearly with bereaved people.

**Abstract:** It is important not to use language in a way that excludes certain people or groups. 'Readability' (or 'understandability', in the case of spoken language) is a common concept in the plain-language field. It applies to choosing both vocabulary and syntax (sentence structure). Having looked in a previous article at techniques to help bereavement-support workers use understandable words and phrases when communicating with clients, this article examines basic techniques to improve sentence clarity. These include avoiding long sentences and paragraphs; using active-voice verbs; and ensuring good grammar, spelling and punctuation. It also describes how to check the readability of your text using a feature built into Microsoft Word.

**Keywords:** readability, understandability, grammar, syntax, sentence structure, Flesch

## Introduction

> *'Language can be used to oppress others by excluding them. This is done by, for example, educated people to exclude the uneducated and by professional people to exclude the non-professionals. Both the words used (vocabulary) and the way they are used in sentences (grammar) can be used to prevent others understanding you, and therefore making them feel left out and inferior. As counselling moves towards greater professionalism, it is important that we do not fall into the trap of excluding people with the language we use.' (Sanders, 2011, p82)*

So began the article I wrote for *Bereavement Care*, Winter 2015, which looked at checking how understandable specific words and phrases are to bereavement-support clients; this helps ensure that the vocabulary you use in your work is as person-centred as possible. This second article looks at how to put these words and phrases together into sentences in a way that is easy to understand, and how to check you have done so. Sanders (2011) refers to this as 'grammar', though a more specific term would be 'syntax' (sentence structure) – defined by the Oxford dictionary as 'the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences' (Waite, 2007, p1049). 'Grammar' is an umbrella term referring to the set of rules in a language – and includes syntax, morphology (the forms and structures of words), phonology (language sounds) and semantics (language meanings).

In common with my previous article, this one draws on concepts and techniques used in plain-language writing and editing (which has been my main paid work since 1997). In particular, the two articles assert the importance of readability (often known as 'understandability' when applied to spoken language), ie. of the target readers/listeners being able to understand what you have said/written quickly and easily the first time they read/hear it, without having to seek clarification. For if they feel 'inferior and left out' (Sanders, 2011, p82), they may well feel unable to ask anyway; in that case, communication breaks down – destroying both psychological contact and

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perception of your empathy for and acceptance of them. While some people do use opaque language purposely to exclude others, many more do so unintentionally. What is clear to us may well not be clear to others, perhaps due to differences between us and the listener (eg. in education, dialect or age) or simply because we inadvertently express our message unclearly or ambiguously. There is an increasing demand for health and social care to be evidence-based, yet the concept of evidence-based communication seems not to have caught on.

## Elements of sentence understandability in bereavement support

In contrast to typical plain-language work (ie. documents aimed at the general public), communication in bereavement support is more often spoken than written (ie. in face-to-face and telephone support). Following many of the plain-language guidelines on both words and sentences comes relatively naturally in speech, for various reasons (Carr, 2002):

- Spoken language is generally less formal than written language.
- Having less time to plan and revise the communication naturally makes sentence structures less complex.
- More often than not, we are addressing the listener directly, which makes them seem less removed (so encouraging a more conversational style).
- The listener's presence also means we receive immediate feedback on how well we have been understood – though we must remember that the client may feel unable to express their lack of understanding 'in the therapeutic context where the therapist/counsellor is already more powerful' (Lago and Smith, 2003, p116). Body language may nonetheless give clues.

However, bereavement-support organisations will produce written information on their services (eg. leaflets and websites), and support is increasingly provided by email as well as face-to-face/in person. For example, in 2014/15, the Cruse National Helpline responded to 5,586 emails (Cruse, 2015) – and the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service to 572 emails (Blue Cross, 2015).

In assessing the clarity of sentences in terms of style and grammar, Plain Language Commission (PLC) (2011) asks: 'Is the style right for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15–20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs? … Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?' While comprehensive plain-English writing/editing involves applying many guidelines – for example, in the *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, Cutts (2013) lists 25, and devotes a whole chapter to each – this article looks at the four key guidelines implicit in the PLC criteria quoted above. Applying plain-English guidelines like these at the sentence level can – in tandem with using short, familiar words and phrases (see my previous article) – make a real difference to the clarity of your text, as I will demonstrate in the last section of this article.

If you are producing an important text, it may also be worth considering using an editor. The Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) is the relevant professional organisation in the UK, and has an online directory of qualified and experienced members: www.sfep.org.uk/directory. Some editors specialise in plain-English work.

### Avoiding long sentences and paragraphs

The longer the sentence, the more readers have to concentrate, putting a greater burden on their working memory. Also, long sentences tend to contain more complex structures, which again take more effort to process because the reader must remember more information in order to understand the whole sentence.

Sentences should be an average of 15 to 20 words, with some longer and some shorter for variety and effect. For example, shorter sentences are useful for emphasis. In each sentence, make one or perhaps two points.

Using short, familiar words and phrases (as covered in my previous article) will help reduce your average sentence length. Other techniques at the sentence-structure level include splitting longer sentences into two or more shorter ones, and using bulleted or numbered lists to separate out your points.

Keep paragraphs reasonably short. Around 100 words per paragraph is about right on average – so about four or five sentences. But it is fine to have some variety in paragraph length. It is a myth that you must not write a one-sentence paragraph – if you have expressed your idea in a single sentence, just stop there and move on to a new paragraph.

### Using active-voice verbs

I will first explain the difference between active- and passive-voice verbs for readers who may not be familiar with these terms.

When a verb ('a word used to describe an action, state, or occurrence, such as hear, become, or happen' – Waite, 2007, p1152) is active, the sentence always includes the person or thing doing the action (which we can call the 'doer'). This is followed by the verb, and then the person or thing that is on the receiving end of the action (the 'receiver'). For example, the following sentence is active:

| **Doer** | **Verb** | **Receiver** |
|---|---|---|
| The volunteer | drafted | an email. |

When a verb is passive, the receiver comes first, followed by the verb. The doer may or may not then be included.

You can also spot a passive verb by the form of words used. A passive verb always includes part of the verb *to be* (*am, are, is, be, being, was, were or been*), followed by a past participle – which you can usually spot by its *-ed* or *-en* ending. If the doer is included, it is introduced by the word *by*. For example, the passive version of the sentence analysed above would be:

| Receiver | Verb | Doer |
|---|---|---|
| An email | was drafted | by the volunteer. |

But you could also miss off the doer:

| Receiver | Verb | Doer |
|---|---|---|
| An email | was drafted. | |

Active verbs are more consistent with plain language because:

- they usually use fewer words, so leading to shorter sentences
- they make the text more personal and human, by always including the doer
- stating the doer (and so being explicit about who is responsible for the action) is consistent with the plain-language values of openness and honesty
- the word order places less strain on the reader's working memory.

If possible, try to convert passive to active verbs, asking yourself who or what is performing the action (there may already be a *by* phrase in the sentence telling you), and starting the sentence with this.

Although it makes sense to favour active verbs where you can, there are times when the passive is better, for example when the doer is irrelevant, unimportant, obvious or unknown (eg. 'Cruse was founded in 1959'); and when starting with the receiver makes your message clearer and punchier (eg. 'Abuse, aggression and violence towards staff will not be tolerated').

## Using good grammar, spelling and punctuation

Good grammar, accurate spelling and correct punctuation are vital to ensure your text is unambiguous, to present a professional image of the individual or organisation producing the text, and to avoid the risk of eagle-eyed readers being distracted and so not getting the message itself. While in many ways emails are less formal than some other forms of writing, Cutts (2013) nonetheless advises: 'Take as much care with email as you would with the rest of your writing.'

If you are not confident in these areas, you could try a course. A web search will show many free online courses; if you are willing and able to pay for a course, the SfEP, PLC and Plain English Campaign also provide various face-to-face and online courses, which you can read about on their websites. It may also be useful to read and refer to a grammar book; such guides come in many shapes, sizes and styles these days. Treat with caution the grammar-checkers in word-processing packages. For all their clever features, computers are poor at understanding language. If you are unfamiliar with grammar rules, you will not know when the checker is giving wrong advice (as they often do).

## Checking you have used sentences clearly

One of the core principles of plain language is testing the text on the target audience. This commonly seeks to measure the audience's:

- understanding of the text
- speed of reading the text
- liking for the text.

The most thorough way of testing a document is to try it out on members of the real audience, though this is feasible only if it is for a reasonably large audience and you have time on your side. This means it is usually not possible with an individualised – as opposed to standard – email. Although usability testing is a specialist area, research has shown that people who are not specifically trained in research methods can test a text effectively using basic methods (Redish *et al*,1981); Table 1 gives some tips. Although this might sound like a lot of work, bear in mind that, for an important text that will be read by many people, testing may pay for itself many times over – in fewer queries and misunderstandings, and better engagement with your audience.

For quicker, simpler testing – which works for all types of text including individualised, confidential emails – you can use computer-based techniques. A study compared the changes suggested by text-editing software and comments made by colleagues. This showed that text-editing programs were more

**Table 1:** Tips on testing text on members of the real audience

- Use any existing groups, or consider forming a focus group (or even appointing a longer-term advisory group), of typical readers.
- Use interviews, focus groups or questionnaires to find out how easy the text is to understand and how fast to read, and how much they like it.
- Be specific about what you ask people to do, and honest about how much influence they really have.
- Dissuade people from being pernickety about small points of style that do not affect how easily they understand the text.
- Make sure people know you are testing the text, not them.
- Tell them that your organisation is responsible for how easy or hard it is to understand.
- Ask people to point out what difficulties they think others may have in understanding the text. They may feel less inhibited to talk about others than about themselves.
- Give people a chance to tell you any problems privately, for example by writing them down.

thorough and systematic than colleagues, but colleagues offered comments on a broader range of aspects of a text's plainness (Hartley, 1984).

Although there are various specialist software packages available (eg. StyleWriter: the Plain English Editor, which is specifically tailored to plain English: see www.editorsoftware.com/StyleWriter.html), the program that is most readily available to most people is that integral to Microsoft Word. After spell-checking your text, the grammar-checker in Microsoft Word shows a panel headed 'Readability Statistics' (so long as you have ticked 'Show readability statistics' under File – Options – Proofing). This includes various scores, including the following:

- 'Sentences per Paragraph' – as noted above, an average paragraph should have about 100 words.
- 'Words per Sentence' – this shows the average sentence length (total number of words divided by total number of sentences), which should ideally be between 15 and 20 words.
- 'Passive Sentences' – this measures the number of sentences with passive-voice verbs as a percentage of total sentences. If this is over 20%, look at your verbs carefully. Ask yourself whether you really need so many passives.
- Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level – many US government departments use this readability formula to test their texts. You can convert the American grade level (which actually fits with the current way of labelling school years in the UK schools, eg. fifth grade = year five) to the reading age by adding 5.
- Flesch Reading Ease – this readability formula scores your writing from 0 (very hard to read) to 100 (very easy). Table 2 shows the equivalent grade-level score and reading age.

The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level are readability formulas; each uses a different formula that combines the average sentence length and the average word length (in terms of the average number of syllables per word) to predict how hard the text will be to read. They ignore other important elements of clear language, as well as tone, content, structure and design. They are therefore quite a crude tool, but can give a useful indication of how easy the text is to read.

When writing for the general public – eg. producing written information on bereavement-support services, such as leaflets and website text – we should ensure it does not exceed the average adult reading age in the UK. It is hard to know exactly

**Table 2:** How the Flesch Reading Ease equates to grade-level scores

| Flesch Reading Ease score | Equivalent grade-level score (reading age) | Description of text with this score |
|---|---|---|
| 90–100 | 5th grade (reading age 10) | Very easy |
| 80–89 | 6th grade (reading age 11) | Easy |
| 70–79 | 7th grade (reading age 12) | Fairly easy |
| 60–69 | 8–9th grade (reading age 13–14) | Manageable |
| 50–59 | 10–12th grade (reading age 15–17) | Fairly hard |
| 30–49 | 13–16th grade (reading age 18–21) | Hard |
| 0–29 | College graduate | Very hard |

**Table 3:** Microsoft Word readability statistics for 'before' and 'after' examples

| | 'Before' version | 'After' version |
|---|---|---|
| **Words** | 102 | 79 |
| **Sentences per paragraph** | 3.0 | 5.0 |
| **Words per sentence** | 34.3 | 15.8 |
| **Passive sentences** | 33% | 0% |
| **Flesch Reading Ease** | 39.7 | 63.3 |
| **Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level** | 16.2 | 8.3 |

what this is, but from the evidence that does exist, PLC estimates 12 to 14 years (Cutts, 2008) – so American 9th grade, or UK year nine. And when replying to an individual (eg. through an email bereavement-support service), we should aim not to exceed the reading-age level of their writing style.

## Bringing it all together

Below is an example of some text from a leaflet describing a bereavement-support service, with my go at editing this for plain English. You may think of better ways of doing this; there is never just one right way of conveying a message.

**Before:** Bereavement support is an opportunity to talk about your loss in a confidential setting with a volunteer bereavement supporter who will listen to you carefully and help you to understand and come to terms with your loss. Our support will continue until you are able to deal more confidently with the very deep emotions resulting from your loss and to cope with the demands of the new routine of every day living. There is no charge for our service, however should you wish to make a donation to our work it would be greatly appreciated but it is by no means obligatory.

**After:** Bereavement support is a chance to talk about your loss in confidence with one of our volunteers. We will listen carefully, and help you understand and come to terms with your loss. Our support will go on until you can deal more confidently with the very deep emotions resulting from your loss, and cope with the demands of the new routine of everyday living. Our service is free of charge. However, we are always happy to receive donations.

In editing this paragraph, I have applied a range of plain-language guidelines, including those described in this and my previous article. For example, I have:

- changed the long word/phrase 'opportunity' and 'in a confidential setting' to the shorter 'chance' and 'in confidence'
- split the first sentence into two
- removed the passive 'it would be greatly appreciated'
- corrected 'every day' to 'everyday' (because in this case it is a one-word adjective)
- corrected the error in using 'however' to join two sentences with a comma (rather than a full stop or semi-colon).

If we look at Word's readability statistics on these two sentences, we get the results shown in Table 3. These suggest I have clarified the text. Ideally, I would then test it with some real target readers, but if this was not possible, the statistics would be a reasonable guide.

## Conclusion

Over 600 years ago, Chaucer wrote a manual on how to operate an astrolabe ('an instrument formerly used for measuring the altitudes of stars and calculating latitude in navigation' – Waite, 2007, p54). In this, he promised to use 'full lighte rules and naked wordes' – so Sanders' easy grammar and clear words, in 14th-century speak! And the clerk in Chaucer's Canterbury tales implored: 'Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye; That we may understonde what ye seye.'

Today, plain-language editors continue to strive for clarity in language: 'What has motivated me and others to work in the plain-English field is that clearer documents can improve people's access to services, benefits, justice, and a fair deal' (Cutts, 2013, pxii). Let us ensure that the language we use in bereavement-support services allows as many people as possible to benefit from our services. ■

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