

Central Bedfordshire Council Plain English guidance for report writing

Before you start writing decide:

- who you are writing for – remember that the public may not be familiar with the subject matter, technical information or initials used for names of bodies
- what you want to say
- what you want the reader to do
- what the reader might ask you when they read your information
- on the tone or style you want to use (for public reports, you may choose a tone that is readable without being too casual).

Style tips

- Always use the report template.
- Use active verbs (80% of your text should be active, use spell checker to test for passive words under “readability”).
- Use mostly short sentences (15-20 words, check under spell checker for average sentence length).
- However, you should consider varying the length of sentences to avoid monotony (maximum length 30 words).
- Avoid jargon (if you think you need to explain a word then don’t use it).
- Use verbs, not nouns (We will *consider* reorganising the filing cabinet NOT *Consideration* will be given to the *reorganisation* of the filing).
- Don’t use Latin or foreign phrases.
- The dog chews its bone; but it’s warm (it is warm).
- We do not boldly go, we go boldly. Consider word order for readability.
- Before using an abbreviation always use the term in full and then put its abbreviation in brackets.
- Cut redundant words (~~future~~ planning, ~~desirable~~ benefits, ~~the colour~~ red).
- Avoid old fashioned words (herewith, forthwith etc).
- Use emphasis only when *really* necessary (so you don’t overuse it)
- Use non-sexist terminology (staffing, not manpower).
- Remember that Central Bedfordshire Council has a Chairman of a committee, whatever their actual gender.
- Write out numbers one to nine in words and use numerals for 10 upwards.
- Always write the date with the day of the week first and in plain numbers: Thursday 18 August 2011 (day, date, month, year).
- Capitals should only be used for proper nouns, such as names or job titles. If the word is a shortened name referring to a specific body use a capital first letter. For example when referring to CBC as the Council it should have a capital letter. Other non-specified councils would have a lower-case letter.
- DON’T USE BLOCK CAPITALS LIKE THIS. Use **bold** instead. Avoid underlining as it’s uncomfortable for some people with sight problems.
- Don’t use shortcuts (use “and” not “&”, “for example” not e.g.).
- Don’t use double negatives (a not uncommon problem).