How to write and produce better information for people with dementia

COMMUNITY FUND

Innovations in Dementia

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Dementia can have a big impact on the ability to read

As reading becomes more difficult, our lives are diminished in many ways.

But how difficult does reading need to be? Or rather, how difficult do we need to make it?

People with dementia can read and process information much more easily if things are well written and clearly presented.

But it's not just people with dementia.

Good writing for people with dementia is good writing for everyone.

Everyone benefits.

So it doesn't matter who your audience is–we hope that these guidelines will help you to get your message across more clearly to all your readers.

This guide was produced with help from the Dementia Diarists DEEP group.

We also conducted an online survey of 123 people, including 23 with dementia.

All quotations in this guide are either from members of the DEEP group, or from people with dementia who participated in the survey.

Innovations in Dementia

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What is in this guide?

We start by looking at **how dementia** can affect reading, and why it matters.

Page 1

We look at the **things we can do** to make our written information better. These include...

Page 10

what is important for the **layout**.

Page 11

a look at the impact of **writing style**.

Page 31

and of course what we write - **the content**.

Page 36

Finally we end with some **overall reflections**.

Page 50

How can dementia affect reading?

Memory and **processing** problems can both affect reading.

People with dementia experience a range of symptoms which can affect their ability to read.

Problems with **memory** can mean that:

- people forget what they have read
- people forget where they are on a page
- people forget what a word means

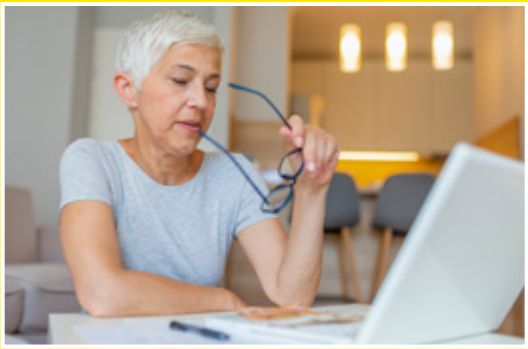
But as we know, dementia is not just about memory.

Problems with **processing** information can mean that:

- people might read more slowly than they used to
- people might lose the ability to make sense of sentences, words or even individual letters

Many people with dementia also have eyesight problems that can make reading more difficult.

Reading skills and the impact of dementia



This page looks at the **skills involved in reading** that can be affected by dementia.

There are a range of different skills and abilities involved in reading. Dementia can have an impact on all of them.

The ability to navigate within a document

People might experience problems finding a particular section or bit of information they need.

The ability to 'orient' oneself

This is closely related to the navigation problem. People might lose track of where they have got to in the document, paragraph or even sentence.

The ability to understand what is being read

People might struggle to understand the meaning of a document, or even individual words or phrases.

The ability to read quickly

If people struggle with individual words or phrases, this will have a big impact on their reading speed. Generally speaking, the faster you are able to read, the more likely you are to be able to comprehend what you are reading.

The ability to concentrate

Our ability to concentrate on any task can be affected by dementia. Reading speed is one factor, but there are others. If concentration is affected, this will exacerbate problems with understanding and remembering what has been read.

> **"If I'm struggling to work out what the sentence is I will lose concentration and sometimes just give up."**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

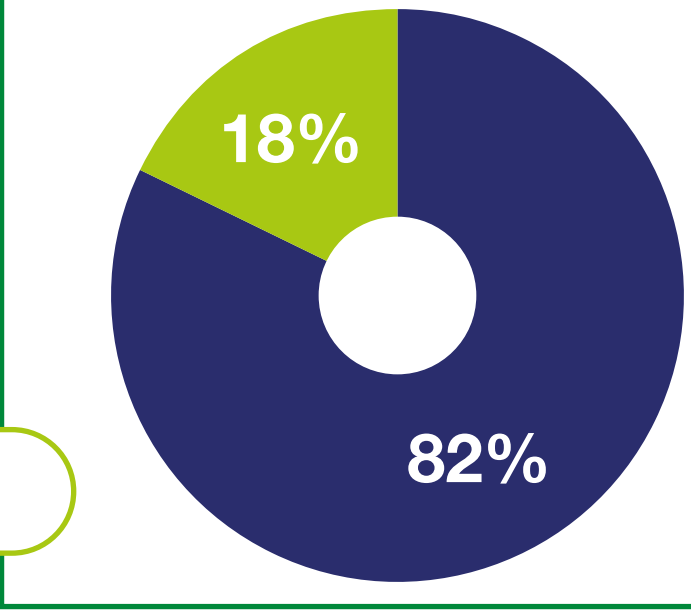
The ability to remember what has been read

For many people, this can be the first reading problem they experience. It's one of the key reasons why many people say they read less often.

At its most acute, some people will struggle to remember the beginning of a sentence by the time they reach the end.

> **"I have to read things over and over again as I've forgotten what I've read."**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

In our survey[1], 82% of people said that their dementia had affected their ability to read.



Reading and the progression of dementia

Dementia can affect reading in **different ways** as dementia progresses.

The way in which dementia affects reading will vary from person to person.

Some people with dementia have problems with reading quite early on. Others might never lose the ability to read.

It is most common for people to struggle first with concentration and remembering what they have read.

As dementia progresses people might struggle to understand what they have read, and what individual words and phrases mean.

Particular causes of dementia can impact on reading in different ways.

People with **Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA)** generally find reading more difficult earlier on than others with dementia. This is not because of memory, but because of the way that the brain processes visual information.

This can make it very hard for people with PCA to read without a great deal of effort. Words on a page can appear to move around, and become distorted.

Reprinted courtesy of Alzheimer's Society

People with **Semantic Dementia** will often have problems understanding the meaning of specific words from early in their dementia. This in turn can slow down reading, and affect focus and recall.

It's important to remember though:

- that everyone is different, and everyone experiences dementia differently
- there's a huge amount that can be done to make it easier for people with dementia to read, simply by writing better

Why does it matter?

Reading problems can have a **significant impact on wellbeing.**

There are many reasons why it matters.

We read for pleasure, and we read for practical purposes - to gain information about the world.

Our survey suggests that for people with dementia, the balance shifts towards reading for practical purposes.

56% of people **without** dementia read **'mainly for pleasure'**.

This drops to **41%** in people **with** dementia.

The majority of people with dementia in our survey said that they read 'for practical purposes'.

This can mean:

- reading the news to keep informed
- reading a bus timetable
- reading instructions for making something
- reading words on signage

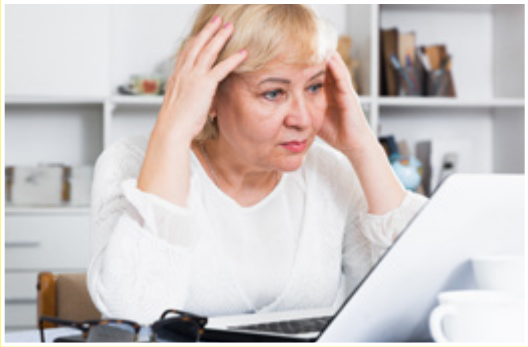
……in other words, reading to enable oneself to function effectively and interact with the world outside.

If this becomes increasingly difficult, people will struggle more and more in their daily lives.

This can mean that people will find it harder to find their way around, or understand instructions. People may get lost or disoriented more easily or find everyday things harder to do. This can ultimately have a huge impact on self confidence, independence and wellbeing.

(Image courtesy of Tony Husband)

A word about ‘cognitive load’ and memory



Good writing reduces our ‘cognitive load’.

Psychologists refer to our **‘working memory’** as the part of the brain that manipulates information ‘in the moment’.

This is contrasted with **‘long term memory’**, in which we store knowledge about ourselves and the world.

The capacity of long term memory is enormous. The capacity of working memory is small. Most of us can only hold three or four bits of information in our working memory and only for about 10 seconds.

‘Cognitive load’ refers to the demand placed upon our working memory.

We know that if the ‘load’ becomes too heavy then our ability to complete a task is badly affected, and we begin to make mistakes.

This is why badly written information places a much higher cognitive load on the reader than it should.

Cognitive psychology suggests that a higher cognitive load has a signifiant impact on our ability to carry out activities in the real world.

Making writing easier to understand by reducing our cognitive load:

- can help people continue to enjoy reading for pleasure
- can make it easier for people to get the information they need to stay active in the real world

This can help people to stay independent and enjoy greater wellbeing for longer.

This is why we have written these guidelines.

What can we do to make our written information better?

In a nutshell, what we are attempting to do is to reduce the ‘cognitive load’ that comes with badly written and presented material.

We’ll be considering:

- layout
- general writing style
- the content

Most of what follows will be relevant to writing for both printed and online publication.

While the layout section is focused largely on printed information, most of it will be relevant to online publication. There may be some differences in the requirements for online publication, and we flag these where we can.

We will focus mainly on writing material intended for practical purposes like the giving of information, or instructions. That said, there will hopefully be some food for thought for those writing materials designed to be read for pleasure. We’ll give this a little more consideration in our final reflections.

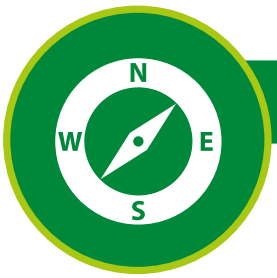
Layout

How the text looks and how it is arranged on the page has a big impact on how easy it is to navigate, read and understand.

This section is divided into **three parts**.

Part 1 – Navigation

In the first part we'll look at things which influence how easily people can **navigate**, or find their way around a written piece.



Page 12

Click to go to page

Part 2 – Reading

In the second, we'll look at those aspects of layout which help with the **reading** of the text.

Page 16

Click to go to page

Part 3 – Understanding

Finally, we'll look at those features which contribute to **understanding** what is being read.

Page 24

Click to go to page

There is, of course, some crossover between these areas, and some features which have an impact in all three.

PART 1- Layout that helps with navigation and orientation

This section looks at **how to make things easier** to find in a document.

Can the reader find the part of the document they are looking for?

For printed information, the most common aids to navigation are a contents list and page numbers.

A contents list does not always have to be a very formal and visually unappealing row of words and numbers. The contents page for this book (shown below) is an example of an alternative style.

Page numbering is important in a longer document, both for navigation and also for orientation.

Orientation

It's **easy to get lost** if you don't know where you are starting from.

Does the reader know where they are in the document, chapter, page, paragraph or sentence?

Maintaining a visual hierarchy

Having an effective and consistent visual hierarchy will help the reader to:

- work out what is going on
- decide whether a particular section will be of interest
- find a particular section or piece of information
- orient themselves within a page and the document as a whole

The kinds of hierarchy you will use will depend to some extent upon what you are writing.

Articles in newspapers and magazines, typically stick to a format of heading, sub-heading, and body of text.

Compare these two versions of the same text. Using a visual hierarchy makes the piece much easier to read and understand.

Massive fish caught
A local angler has caught a really enormous fish in the harbour.
Local angler Mike Jones wasn't expecting to pull in anything other than the usual tiddlers when he cast his line into the harbour yesterday.

Massive fish caught

A local angler has caught a really enormous fish in the harbour.

Local angler Mike Jones wasn't expecting to pull in anything other than the usual tiddlers when he cast his line into the harbour yesterday.

The most important thing is to be consistent are setting up your styling. Whatever font choices you use for headings, sub-headings and main text, keep using those same ones throughout your document. Keep whatever size of type that you are using for each of these consistent as well.

It is likely that the reader will get lost more easily, and find what is written harder to understand and recall.

As well as making your document look like a dogs dinner.

And we don't want that *DO WE* ?

Page numbering

This is an important orienting factor in a longer document. Formatting in a style such as, '**page 14 of 52**' is of even more assistance.

PART 2 - Layout that helps with reading

Our **choice of font** makes a big difference.

The font

The font is sometimes called the typeface, or text. In our survey, people with and without dementia, said the font was the most important aspect of layout.

Poor choice of font can cause a cascade of problems for people with dementia.

- it makes it harder to see individual letters
- this means that it increases the number of times a person has to re-read a phrase or sentence

….and so

- reading speed decreases

……and so

- comprehension and recall decreases

There are two issues to think about - size and font choice.

Firstly the **size** of the font.

A font size of at least 14 is widely recommended as the minimum for the body of the text. 20 is regarded as a good size for headings.

This document is written in 14-point text.

For many people with a visual impairment, the option to increase text size is one advantage of reading on a tablet or computer.

Remember, many people with dementia will also have a visual impairment because of their dementia, or more commonly, because of other conditions.

Secondly the **choice** of font.

Fonts can be divided into those with serifs, and those without.

Serifs are the little adornments that can be seen on the 'feet' of many fonts.

Here are three different examples of **serif** fonts:

Georgia Times Baskerville

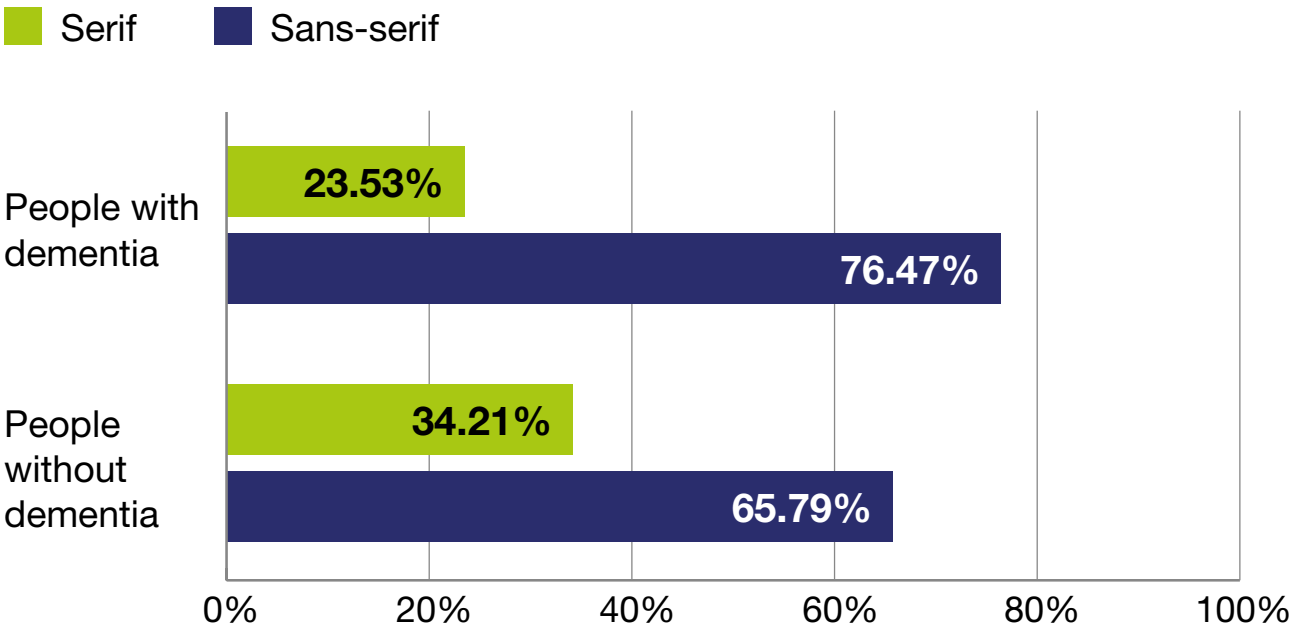
Fonts without serifs are known as sans-serif fonts.

Here are three different **sans-serif** fonts:

Helvetica Arial Microsoft

So which works best?

Our survey results showed strong preference for a sans-serif font by both people with and without dementia.



Some studies have shown increased reading speed for serifed fonts. However our results tally with the consensus in other studies which favour sans-serif fonts for legibility, especially for online publication.

Our survey told us that for people with dementia, and for those without:

- it is important to choose one font and stick to it
- it is important to avoid ornate or gimmicky fonts. Simple and clear is best

Next we look at the **importance of contrast.**

Finally, the **contrast** between the typeface and the background is really important.

The **contrast needs to be high**.

✓ This **is** relatively easy to read.

✗ This **is not** so easy to read. The lower the contrast, the more difficult it becomes.

HOWEVER…..

We know that *too much* contrast, whilst being highly legible, is also tiring on the eyes to read.

Which do you prefer?

High contrast is good, but too much contrast can be hard on the eyes and tiring to read.

High contrast is good, but too much contrast can be hard on the eyes and tiring to read.

In our survey there was a strong preference for a light beige background rather than a white background.

62% of people with no dementia preferred a light beige background.

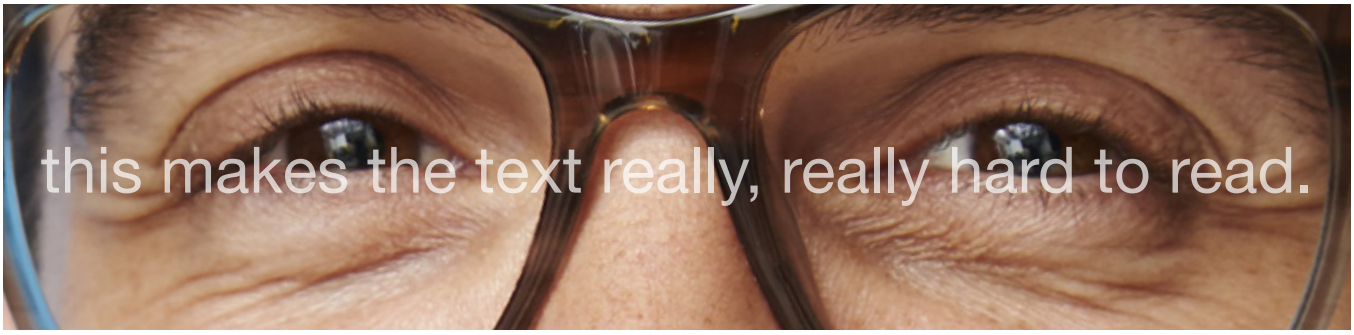
67% of people with dementia preferred a light beige background.

There has been lots of work done on contrast, especially for people with dyslexia and visual impairment. Many people with dementia experience a form of dyslexia, AND most will have some degree of visual impairment.

The general consensus is that there's a need to balance legibility and readability. In other words, what is easier to read for a few seconds might be much more tiring over the space of a few minutes or longer.

One more thing about background and contrast.

Avoid text over background images like the plague. It's a nightmare to read for everyone.



This page looks at the **spacing of text.**

The spacing of text

Make sure that you have plenty of white space around the text. You can achieve this by having decent borders on all sides, and also with **line spacing.**

EXAMPLE

Focusing your gaze at the camera when you are speaking means that you are looking directly at those watching from their perspective. If you look at yourself or others on the screen while you are speaking, then you will not be 'making eye contact' with the others in the meeting.

Line-spacing of **0.8 in the box above** is much more difficult to read than **1.3 below**.

EXAMPLE

Focusing your gaze at the camera when you are speaking means that you are looking directly at those watching from their perspective. If you look at yourself or others on the screen while you are speaking, then you will not be 'making eye contact' with the others in the meeting.

Don't go overboard on this though, lines that are too far apart become tiring to read as the eye has to travel further at the end of each line.

Keep line length to below 80 characters, including spaces, for printed material, and up to 100 characters for online materials.

One more thing…

Don't allow words to become split between lines. Particularly as hyphenation isn't easy to understand or follow.

Try not to let sentences slip over into the next

page.

This page looks at the **alignment** of text.

There are a variety of ways to line up text. This is sometimes known as 'alignment'. How we arrange lines can make a big difference to how easy a piece is to read.

Always align the left margin.

Left-aligned

Once a year the good citizens of Exwick gather to bless the trees in the hope of a good harvest. Drums are bashed, trumpets are blown, and toast is hung in the bare branches of the young trees. In Devon, this ceremony is known as 'Wassailing'.

Don't 'justify' or align the right-hand side of the block of text. An irregular right-hand margin makes for easier reading, and provides a 'hook' for the eyes when moving to the next line.

Justified

Once a year the good citizens of Exwick gather to bless the trees in the hope of a good harvest. Drums are bashed, trumpets

Right-aligned

Once a year the good citizens of Exwick gather to bless the trees in the hope of a good harvest. Drums are bashed,

Centre-aligned blocks of text **make it harder** for the readers eye to 'return' to the next line.

Centre-aligned

Once a year the good citizens of Exwick gather to bless the trees in the hope of a good harvest. Drums are bashed, trumpets are blown,

This page looks at the **spacing of text.**

The column conundrum

Traditionally, the text in newspapers and magazines is laid out in multiple columns. The text in books is usually in single columns.

Here is an example of a three column layout:

We know that people can find symbols hard to understand, especially people with dementia. Earlier research had been done by Studio LR in Edinburgh – and had identified particular symbols which people struggle with, and why.

This can mean that people find it harder to find their way around, or understand instructions. This can mean people get lost or disoriented more easily or find everyday things harder to do. This can ultimately have a huge impact on self confidence, independence and wellbeing.

It's not just people with dementia either. Even if you don't think you struggle to understand symbols – the more thinking you have to do to make a connection between a symbol and thing you are looking for – the higher your 'cognitive load'.

Many people with dementia struggle with multiple columns. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, some people say that their eye wants to ‘read across’ the columns. This means that rather than reading this:

We know that people can find symbols hard to understand, especially people with dementia. Earlier research had been done by Studio LR in Edinburgh – and had identified particular symbols which people struggle with, and why.

This can mean that people find it harder to find their way around, or understand instructions. This can mean people get lost or disoriented more easily or find everyday things harder to do. This can ultimately have a huge impact on self confidence, independence and wellbeing.

It’s not just people with dementia either. Even if you don;t think you struggle to understand symbols – the more thinking you have to do to make a connection between a symbol and thing you are looking for – the higher your ‘cognitive load’. Cognitive psychology suggests that a

What the eye *wants* them to read, and what they sometimes *do* read is this:

We know that people can find symbols hard to understand, especially people with dementia. Earlier research had been done by Studio LR in Edinburgh – and had identified particular symbols which people struggle with, and why.

This can mean that people find it harder to find their way around, or understand instructions. This can mean people get lost or disoriented more easily or find everyday things harder to do. This can ultimately have a huge impact on self confidence, independence and wellbeing.

It’s not just people with dementia either. Even if you don;t think you struggle to understand symbols – the more thinking you have to do to make a connection between a symbol and thing you are looking for – the higher your ‘cognitive load’. Cognitive psychology suggests that a higher cognitive

Secondly, because lines of text are shorter, it means that less information can be taken in every time the eye moves. This breaks the flow of reading and introduces more scope for mistakes and problems with remembering what has been read.

In our survey, many of the people who report problems like this *are* able to read columns, but find it more tiring and easier to lose focus.

The results from our survey showed a preference for single columns for both people with and those without dementia.

However, we also know that many people find large areas of unbroken text in a single column quite daunting.

> **"If all text is in one block, it needs to be broken down for me to be able to read easier."**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

It arguably looks less attractive too. There is little point in the most accessible of pieces if a person doesn't want to pick it up and read it.

It's a conundrum. So what can we do?

If you are using columns:

- keep them well-spaced, giving the eye a chance to pick up on the cue to 'return' to the next line
- don't use too many columns. Every new column decreases the amount of words in a line, and the number of 'returns' the eye has to make in scanning the text
- find other ways of setting out the columns. For example, put a line between the columns, or place them into boxes
- use images, boxes or other things to add visual interest to the page. However, make sure that they are relevant to the text AND that they don't break the flow of text by being placed in the middle of a paragraph
- don't have paragraphs that go on for ever

PART 3 - Layout that helps with understanding

How the **content is presented** is very important.

In the last section we looked at the elements of layout that make our writing easier to read. In this section we will look at what can be done with layout to make what is written easier to understand.

Text summaries

For pages of more than 300 words, capturing the essence of a page in a single sentence can work really well:

- it can help a reader decide whether the page is of interest
- it gets across the key information for those who want to skim through
- it acts as a reminder whilst reading should the reader lose the thread

We've used text summaries on many pages of this document.

Bullet–points are great, but easy to get wrong

Bullet-points are a great way of organising lists of information. They can help to break up large areas of text, and make it easy for the reader to find the information they need.

Here's a few pointers for making the best of them:

- keep your bullet-points short, ideally one line per bullet
- use 'bullets' for lists that have no order or hierarchy
- use numbered lists for instructions, or if the list is long, and you want to be able to refer readers to a specific point
- try and avoid lists that are too long
- don't overuse bullet-points. Too many and they can become tiring and tedious to read as well as breaking up the 'flow'

It's common to see lists where each point is linked to the final word of the preceding line. This proceeding line is known as the leading phrase.

If you have a dog, make sure that it:

- always has clean water to drink
- gets regular exercise
- doesn't eat too much curry before the dog show
- your dog will enjoy a nap after a walk

In terms of cognitive load, this is not without its challenges. The brain is having to work quite hard to remember the association with the... **'make sure that it:'** part of the text, as it works down the list of bullet points.
The longer the list, the more onerous this can become.

One of the commonest errors in using bullet-points is that of inconsistency. When **this common mistake** happens, then things become even more difficult.

The final bullet-point does not make sense when put together with the leading phrase.

When this happens the ‘flow’ of reading can become completely disrupted, and the reader may struggle to make sense of any further points because the connection has been broken.

Each bullet point **MUST** work with the leading phrase.

If you have a dog, make sure that it:

- has clean water to drink
- gets regular exercise
- doesn’t eat too much curry before the dog show
- has a chance for a nap after a walk

Read each bullet point with the leading phrase as a single sentence to check that it makes sense.

Another way to avoid this problem is to use sentences that make sense without reference to the words that precede them.

You might want to consider this approach if your list is more than five or so points long.

If you have a dog, always:

- make sure it has clean water to drink
- make sure it gets regular exercise
- be careful not to let it eat too much curry before the dog show
- remember your dog might need a nap after a walk
- give it lots of attention when it does something good

Use examples to illustrate points

A well-placed example can go a long way. We’ve used them throughout this guide.

Using pictures

This page is about **using images**.

Why describe a rabbit when you can show a picture of one?

Photographs and illustrations are a great way of painting a thousand words, breaking up large bodies of text and adding visual interest.

Make sure they are directly relevant to the subject in hand. It's not uncommon for designers to insert pictures whose relevance is obscure if not entirely absent.

Pictures like this, for example, in an article about dementia.

Sure, people like flowers, but what on earth do they have to do with dementia?

These kinds of disassociated images distract people. This then affects focus and comprehension.

EXAMPLE

Here's another image that's often used in articles about dementia. The dreaded 'wrinkly hands'.

This image is a bugbear for many people with dementia and carers. We would recommend it's use only when:

- they are the hands of the person who is the subject of the article
- the article is specifically about that person's hands

Text over images

As noted above, avoid text over background images like the plague. It's a nightmare to read for everyone.

About cartoons

Previously, we advised against using cartoons.

At the time, easy-read materials designed for people with learning disabilities made a lot of use of cartoons and line-drawings. Many of these found their way into materials for people with dementia.

People with dementia told us they found them childish. We're pretty sure that many people with learning disabilities felt the same way.

Since then there has been a big improvement in cartoons designed for adults, specifically about dementia, and the issues facing people with dementia.

Here's a great example from the creator of the Private Eye 'Yobs' strip Tony Husband.

Cartoon with kind permission by Tony Husband

So, our advice is to use cartoons and drawings if they help, but be mindful and respectful of your audience.

Making websites more accessible

For **online** interaction there are a number of features which can make a site easier to navigate:

- the main navigation of the site should be fixed in position so that it remains **clearly visible at all times**. Obviously this is particularly significant for scrolling on a page. Technically this is known as ‘sticky’ navigation
- **HOME** should always be used as a title in the navigation and ideally always as the first or the main left hand tab. This means that wherever the reader is in the site, they can always easily return to the home page

Think about more than one way to reach any page, for example:

- a search function (that works)
- site maps
- ‘back to the top’ popups that appear whenever the viewer scrolls down. The longer the page the more welcome this will be

The web page below is an example that incorporates these features:

Writing style

What is the impact of **writing style?**.

We all have our own style of writing, our own unique approach.

Some styles of writing are easier to understand than others.

In fact, some styles are **much** better than others if you want the reader to enjoy or understand what you have written.

Writers that routinely do the things listed below will be more easily understood.

Write clearly

It seems obvious that information should be written clearly. However we will all have encountered information that is anything but clear.

This is obviously important when writing instructions. It the writing is not clear, then the instructions will be more difficult to follow.

More generally though, if the information you are writing is not clear, it won't be understood, and may not even be read beyond the first few sentences.

It's hard work to read things that are unclear. It increases our cognitive load and makes life in general more difficult than it needs to be.

What follows will help you to write more clearly.

The importance of ‘flow’

Writing which carries the reader along with it tends to have a sense of ‘flow’. It can be hard to pin down precisely what ‘flow’ is, but it seems to have the following characteristics:

One idea leads logically to the next.

Ideas that don’t flow, create a “eh? what?” moment for the reader, who may be forced to check back on what they have read. It can act as a block.

EXAMPLE

> Good writing makes life easier for everyone. It makes reading more pleasurable, and gets information across much more effectively. It can also improve our thinking as writers because it makes us focus on what we really want to say. Some people don’t find it easy to do.

That final sentence might be correct, but it’s a poor fit within the flow of the paragraph.

Sentences, paragraphs and sections move comfortably from one to the next.

Let’s look at how that awkward sentence might be better used:

EXAMPLE

> Good writing makes life easier for everyone. It makes reading more pleasurable, and gets information across much more effectively. It can also improve our thinking as writers because it makes us focus on what we really want to say.
>
> However, some people don’t seem to find it easy to do. This is evident from the sheer amount of poorly written information we encounter in our daily lives.
>
> But it doesn’t need to be this way.

The use of ‘**however and but**’ acts as a bridge to the next idea. It also gives us an idea of what to expect on the ‘road’ ahead in the paragraph.

There are no sudden shifts of tone or style.

Unless employed for creative reasons, sudden shifts of style can act as brake on the ‘flow’ of the piece:

However, some people don’t seem to find it easy to do. This is evident from the sheer amount of poorly written information we encounter in our daily lives.

But it doesn’t need to be this way. Verily it is beholden upon scribes to fashion instructional counsel that is the very exemplar of perspicuity.

There are no sudden shifts of ‘narrative voice’.

The ability to inhabit the perspective of the story teller is important and requires a good deal of effort and concentration.

If the person telling the story, the ‘narrative voice’, suddenly changes , it can be extremely confusing.

I was walking down the road when I saw three men sitting together in a car. I noticed that two of them were dressed as circus clowns and the third appeared to be a caveman. He found himself wondering where clowns got their shoes mended.

The writing is concise, with no unnecessary or ‘grandiose’ language.

A machine that works well doesn’t have any unnecessary parts. The same goes for good writing. Make sure that every word, sentence, and paragraph are necessary.

Consider this sentence:

Writing that is accessible, that is to say, is easier for people with dementia and other cognitive impairments to understand and process will lead to increased enjoyment and improved comprehension by everyone, including people who don’t have dementia and/or other cognitive or sensory impairments.

There's an awful lot going on there for the reader to process.

Alternatively, we might say:

Good writing is easier for everyone to read.

It's the same meaning, but stripped of waffle.

It takes the reader straight to the point the writer wants to make.

The writing avoids repeating words and clunky sentence structures.

Writing clearly doesn't have to mean writing mechanically.

There will be occasions when things are better presented as bullet points, in which case consistency is important. However, using the same words and structures over and over again in open text can create an unpleasant, tedious and 'choppy' reading experience.

Try this:

Writing clearly can help people with dementia. Writing clearly can help people with dementia to focus. Writing clearly can help people with dementia to understand.

The sentences are short, which is usually a good thing, but it's hardly a pleasure to read. It feels like the reading equivalent of cycling down a cobbled street with flat tyres.

This next version avoids both the repetition of key words, and varies sentence structure to create interest and keep the reader 'flowing'.

Writing clearly can help people with dementia. In particular, people who struggle with focus and understanding will find clearly written information easier.

Don’t forget your audience

It’s important to remember that we are writing clearly for adults with dementia.

Many people with dementia will have had a rich and varied lifetime of reading and employ a large vocabulary. They are not children.

About the ‘tone’ of the writing

Many people with dementia have said that they prefer writing which feels informal.

> **“It’s best when it feels like the writer is talking to me.”**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

The best way to achieve this is to avoid some of the common errors discussed in the sections below on ‘sentences’ (page 42 of 52, click **here** to go to page) and ‘words’ (page 39 of 52, click **here** to go to page).

At the same time, try to avoid over-simplifying the language. Remember, you are talking to adults, not children.

Content

In this section we are going to look more closely at the content of what we write, and how to make it more accessible to everyone.

Much of the section Writing Style (page 31 of 52, click **here** to go to page) is relevant here of course, but this is a more nuts and bolts examination.

Writing accessibly is not always easy. Some subjects lend themselves more readily to it than others, but improvements can usually be made, even to technical documents.

What to consider before you start writing.

The most important first step is to have a clear understanding of:

- what do you want your audience to know?
- who is your audience?
- how do you want to express it?

What do you want your audience to know?

Ask yourself *what you want the reader to know, or understand, as a result of your piece.*

This will help your piece to be much more focused, and enable you to work out what needs to be there and what doesn't.

For example, in an article written for potential users of a new service, you might want people to know:

- what the service is about
- who it is for
- when and where it happens
- how they find out more

Of lesser, and sometimes of no importance to potential customers are things like:

- information about dementia. Your audience know about it already
- information about the aims of the service, or the impact you want it to have. This is especially true if it is couched in management-speak
- too much information about your organisation. Your audience really don't need to know what your mission statement is

If however the article is aimed at a general audience, then it's likely you will include more of this kind of information. Written in an accessible way of course, not cut-and-pasted from your last management report.

Who is your audience?

It's important to be clear who your audience is. Much of the time we are writing for a general audience, and some of the time for specific groups of reader. The content and style of our writing should be relevant to its intended audience.

For example, an article about a new piece of research written for academics in that field will be very different from one written for a general audience. (This doesn't mean that academic material should be poorly written or unnecessarily complex).

One important thing to try and avoid is using language which excludes people with dementia. Look at these two similar lines:

1. the British love fish and chips
2. the British love their fish and chips

From which sentence might we infer that this article is written for people who are not British?

The first sentence is more likely to create a sense of '**we**' as well as '**they**'.

The second is much more likely to create a sense of '**they**', rather than '**we**'.

Similarly:

1. people with dementia may experience problems with perception
2. **...they** may experience problems with perception

It would be easy to infer from line two, that people with dementia are 'them', and not 'us'.

How do you want to express it?

Once you have decided what you want the reader to know or understand, it's time to work out how to get that message across.

We start at the most basic level, by looking at the words we use.

Words

The role of **individual words** in making reading easier.

“Words can invite people in, or keep them out.”

(Think Local Act Local Podcast[2])

“I struggle with technical phrases and grandiose words when simpler ones would suffice.”

(Survey participant with dementia)

65% of people with dementia in our survey said they struggle with words.

It’s not just people with dementia either. **21%** of survey respondents who didn’t have dementia said they struggle with words too.

Jargon

Everyone knows it’s important not to use jargon. The problem is, there are often different views on what constitutes jargon. This is especially true in Health and Social Care.

Bear in mind that words that might seem everyday for those working in a service or organisation, might seem entirely alien to others.

Activities of daily living

Advocacy

Aids and adaptations

…and that's just the start of jargon beginning with 'a' from the excellent social care jargon buster [3].

This is especially important for people with dementia, because in many cases they and their families will have had no contact with 'the system' until they developed dementia.

This is not always the case with other people with disabilities, who may have spent a great deal of their lives having to learn how to navigate and understand the system.

So check that the words you are using are as widely understood by people outside of your field as possible.

The same goes for **acronyms** - words made of the first letters of a longer phrase.

Never use an acronym because you assume that everyone knows what it means.

…or indeed that *you* know what it means.

Sometimes though it's unavoidable:

- when the acronym is better known than the full name. For example, SCUBA (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus)
- when the full name is so long and arduous that it interrupts the flow. For example, our project DEEP, which stands for the Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project. We even got some jargon in there too for good measure! We just call it DEEP these days

If you **must** use an acronym, then follow it with the full name, at least once at the start of the piece.

Low-frequency exception words

How's that for a bit of jargon!

How about **'hard words you don't see very often'** instead?

Exception words are words in which the rules of spelling and pronunciation don't work in the usual way.

Low-frequency just means, 'words that aren't used a lot'.

Research[4] suggests that some people with dementia struggle to read these words because they are harder for the brain to process. This is particularly true for people with semantic dementia, who are more likely to rely on spelling out the word, rather than upon memory of what the word is likely to be, and mean.

Common exception words like 'door', 'the', and 'you' are thought to be easier to read because their place in memory is more established.

Uncommon exception words like 'strait' or 'rhythm' present a bigger challenge.

Uncommon words

At the risk of sounding like a sententious martinet, it obviously makes sense to avoid words that are rarely used, even if they are not exception words.

'A non metallic sphere of mineral composition, when rotating about its horizontal axis, is disinclined from the accumulation of non-vascular plants in the land plant division Bryophyt'

Or

'A rolling stone gathers no moss'

Sentences

How we put our **sentences** together can make the greatest difference of all.

When it comes to writing, it's the way we write sentences that can make the greatest difference.

> **"Usually it's the construction of the sentences that I find hard to get to grips with."**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

> **"(I struggle) if they are not coherently written."**
> (Survey participant with dementia)

While **65%** of people with dementia in our survey struggle with words, **88%** struggle at the level of sentences.

The same goes for **28%** of people without dementia.

The way we construct our sentences makes an enormous difference to readability and understanding.

Much of this section focuses on grammar and punctuation.

Many people learn grammar and punctuation from an early age. Combine that with a lifetime of reading, and the hidden language and codes of grammar and punctation are deeply ingrained.

If we use poor grammar and punctuation we risk sending the wrong messages about how a piece should be read. Legibility, comprehensibility and retention of information will all suffer.

These are enormous subjects in themselves, but we tried to focus on those aspects which most strongly impact upon the legibility and comprehensibility of a written piece.

For more information about grammar and punctuation generally, there's a wealth of information online.

Sentence length

It's easy to lose concentration within a long sentence.

Each full-stop provides a tiny break, giving the reader a chance to take stock before moving on. If there's too much to take on, then the person may need to read the sentence again or risk losing the thread.

Can you read it out aloud in a single breath? If not, it's probably too long.

Think about breaking things down into shorter sentences, or even separate paragraphs.

If you come over we can take a walk down the river and maybe go for a drink, then go for something to eat, but we should be careful to take the right clothes because there's some rain forecast for later in the day, which is pretty typical of this lousy summer.

Or

If you come over we can take a walk down the river and maybe go for a drink. Then we can go for something to eat.

We should be careful to take the right clothes because there's some rain forecast for later in the day.

This is pretty typical of this lousy summer.

Sentences should mean something

Each sentence should mean something in its own right.

The full stop is a sign that the reader should take stock before moving on.

A comma, on the other hand is telling the reader that what comes next is still of relevance to what has just been read.

This means that sentences which only make sense with reference to the one before can cause confusion.

✓ Grapes are my favourite fruit, they are so sweet and juicy.

....is a little easier than

✗ Grapes are my favourite fruit. They are so sweet and juicy

Watch out for too many ‘subordinate clauses’

Subordinate clauses are parts of a sentence that do not make sense on their own. Their job is to add meaning to the main part of the sentence.

Subordinate clauses add detail and colour to a sentence. In this example, the relationship between the two parts of the sentence are simple and direct. The cognitive load is relatively low.

✓ **I like to eat fresh fruit, which I buy from the market.**

However, using too many clauses can cause confusion. In this example the relationships between the various parts of the sentence are more complex, and the reader is forced to hold a lot of information in their head.

✗ **I like to eat fresh fruit, especially oranges, which I do everyday, or at least I try to, even if I don’t always manage it.**

Use positive words

Positive words stress the way things are, were, will be, or would be.

Sentences using positive words are generally easier to understand than language which stresses the way things are not, were not, will not be, or would not be.

- don’t forget to put the bins out
- do not get the paper wet
- John couldn’t remember where he left the car

- remember to put the bins out
- keep the paper dry
- John forgot where he put the car

Avoid double-negatives

More confusing still are double-negatives.

If you are going to use a negative, limit yourself to one.

Don’t let Jack not go for a run today.
Don’t forget not to eat soup on the roller-coaster.

Don’t let Jack miss his run today.
Don’t eat soup on the rollercoaster.

The importance of punctuation

Our writing will be easier to read, and easier to understand if we use punctation properly.

It tells the reader where to place an emphasis, where to pause, and for how long to pause. It also tells the reader what to expect next.

Punctuation can make a big difference to the emphasis or the entire meaning of even the shortest sentence.

Let's eat, Gran.

Let's eat Gran.

I'm sorry I love you.

I'm sorry; I love you.

The correct use of punctuation will also make it easier for those using screen readers online.

Excellent guides to punctuation are available online.

Paragraphs

This section is about **how to write better paragraphs**.

Avoid long paragraphs

Generally speaking, aim for less than 50 words in your paragraphs.

Paragraphs of less than 50 words are not only easier to read and understand, but they look much more inviting on a page or on screen.

Paragraphs should make sense

Paragraphs should make sense, and move logically from one point to the next.

It took me a few days to get over the jet-lag but it was worth it, because I had a great holiday. I swam in the sea everyday, which was brilliant. I can't wait to try out my new skills in the swimming pool. I also got a nice suntan and the food was delicious.

I had a great holiday. The food was great and I swam in the sea every day, so I'm quite tanned. Despite the jet-lag I'm looking forward to trying out my new skills in the swimming pool.

The second paragraph is more coherent. It starts with the main idea (great holiday), then lists the reasons why. It also talks about things in the order they happened, rather than jumping around in time.

Remember to flow

In the section on ‘flow’ (page 32 of 52, click **here** to go to page) we saw the importance of making sure that all parts of a document work together.

A document which flows well will be easier to read, easier to understand, and easier to navigate as well.

Try to make sure that:

- one idea leads logically to the next
- paragraphs move comfortably from one to the next
- there are no sudden shifts of tone or style
- there are no sudden shifts of ‘narrative voice’

A final reflection

This document is aimed mainly at those wanting to write information that other people need to know.

However, we hope that there will be food for thought in here for writers of all kinds of material.

Remember though, these are just guidelines, and you shouldn't cramp your style in the pursuit of accessibility… so long as your style is working for you and your readers of course.

The clearest most accessible writing in the world is of no use if it is so dull that no-one wants to read it.

The written word, and the English language are things of beauty, and nothing in this guide should deter you from expressing yourself in whichever way you want.

However it is our hope that everyone will find something to take away that can make their writing more accessible, more useful and more pleasurable for everyone to read.

A few words about the making of the guidelines

We worked with people with dementia to develop these guidelines. Many people shared with us their challenges with reading, as well as ideas for making written information easier to read.

Many others took part in an online survey, as did people without dementia, teaching us even more about the challenges they face.

One important thing that we learned from the survey was that there was very little difference between the types of challenges faced by people with dementia, and those without.

The same goes for solutions.

This leads us to be able to say with confidence that good writing for people with dementia is good writing for everyone. Everyone benefits.

So it doesn't matter who your audience is... we hope that these guidelines will help you to get your message across more clearly to all your readers.

> **"My saving grace is I cling to the thought that I have enjoyed the book and that is what matters most even if I cannot remember anything from it."**
>
> (Survey participant with dementia)

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References

1. We conducted an online survey in 2020. 21 people with dementia and 102 people without dementia took part.

2. Think Local Act Global Podcast here: **https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/Podcast-why-language-matters-in-social-care/**

3. Think Local Act Personal Jargon Buster **https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Browse/Informationandadvice/CareandSupportJargonBuster/#Assets**

4. The neural basis of surface dyslexia in semantic dementia Stephen M. Wilson, Simona M. Brambati, Roland G. Henry, Daniel A. Handwerker,Federica Agosta, Bruce L. Miller, David P. Wilkins, Jennifer M. Ogar and Maria Luisa Gorno-Tempini Brain 2009: 132; 71–86

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To find out more about making things accessible to people with dementia, visit our website here:

www.innovationsindementia.org.uk/what-we-do/accessibility/

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