



# **Writing for SQA**

## **Part B: Guidelines on using plain English**

This edition: May 2012

Publication code: FF4619

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# 1 Why is plain English important?

It makes sense to make everything we say as easy to understand as possible. Using plain English is a way of demonstrating our corporate values — quality, integrity, innovation, partnership and service — and that we're:

- ◆ customer-focused
- ◆ striving for better ways of working
- ◆ making best use of our resources
- ◆ reliable
- ◆ supportive
- ◆ open and honest
- ◆ promoting equality

Plain English is important because it helps us with:

**Customer focus:** Writing in a way that's easy to understand means that our customers have to do less work translating our writing. Everyone would rather receive material they can understand without having to concentrate really hard, however clever they are.

**Better ways of working, best use of resources:** Writing in a way that's easy to understand means we have to spend less time providing clarification. It also means we're less open to being misinterpreted.

**Being reliable, supportive, open and honest:** We're not trying to blind people with science, or hide behind a smokescreen. If we use plain English, we're saying what we mean, in a way people will understand.

**Promoting equality:** For similar reasons, using plain English is part of promoting equality, because by writing in a simple and straightforward way, we're not (deliberately) excluding anyone. We also have duties to abide by equalities legislation — there's more about this in the subsection on 'Accessibility' in the 'Using words' section and at [www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/25340.html](http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/25340.html).

## 2 Writing documents

The most important thing about writing anything — procedural document or shopping list — is knowing what you want to say. Don't put pen to paper, or finger to key, until you do know. If you don't know what you want to say, talking it over with someone is a good way to get your thoughts straight.

### Writing a document — general tips

Woolliness, confusion, or incomprehensibility is often a result of writers not really having planned what they are going to say. Worse still, it is sometimes the result of a writer not having anything to say about a subject but having to produce a document for some reason or other. If you find yourself in this position, ask for help before you start writing — this will save time in the long run.

If you do have a fairly clear idea of what you have to say, draw up a quick plan. The best sort of plan is a list of numbered points, following one another in a logical order. It might help you if you think of what you have to say as a story. Imagine yourself explaining whatever it is you're writing about to an audience and having to make them follow your line of thought.

The plan you make will probably form the basis of your sections when you come to write. Here's an example of a plan for a fictitious publication, the *Teaching Guide for the Group Award in Picture Framing*:

- 1 Introduction: who the guide is for
- 2 An explanation of the Units, their purpose and structure
- 3 What you will need to do the Group Award
- 4 What will happen when you do the Group Award
- 5 How to gather evidence
- 6 How to record evidence
- 7 What happens next
- 8 What you can do after you've done the qualification
- 9 More information/contacts

If you find you can't write a plan like this, you're probably not yet ready to write your document. You will have to sit down and think again, or ask for advice.

## Overlap with other documents

Ask this question before you start to write: is there a degree of overlap with an existing document? It might be the case, for instance, that the *Teaching Guide for the Group Award in Picture Framing* has a lot in common with the *Guide to Assessment* (AA4147, November 2009). When you're referring to an SQA publication for the first time in a document, give its publication code and date, as in the example. After that, you can just give its title, as in the next sentence. Never lift chunks out of the other publication and repeat them in your document — use a reference, eg 'see *Guide to Assessment*, page xx'.

The main reason for not quoting large chunks of text from other publications is that the publication you are quoting from may be out of date long before the one you are writing.

In a situation where you don't think your reader will have access to the document there is overlap with, you can quote very short passages (say no more than two sentences), or paraphrase its arguments, but please keep this to a minimum.

## Reading what you are writing

Almost as important as having a plan is reading what you have written. Once you have started, go back as often as you like and look at what you have said. Particularly, look for places where you have repeated yourself, or where you have contradicted yourself.

If you have a clear idea of what you have already said, you will minimise the risk of getting yourself confused. This will save editing time, and help you keep down the number of words you use.

## How many words should I write?

If there is one basic principle for writing clearly, it is this: *keep it short and simple*. This applies across the board to words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and, especially, to documents. Say what you want to say in as few words as you can, then say no more — saying more tends to confuse the issue.

## **Guidelines for the structure of documents**

### **Sections (or chapters)**

Long documents should be divided into self-contained sections. You should use each section to say everything you have to say about an aspect of your subject matter. If you are writing a section on, for instance, assessment instruments, don't let what you have to say about assessment instruments spill over into your section on verification.

By the same token, you mustn't repeat chunks of text from one section in another. It may well be, for instance, that what you've said in your portfolio-building section about the amount of evidence needed in a portfolio has a bearing on internal verification, but that is no reason to quote it in full. Use a reference — eg 'see page xx', or 'see section 13, 'Building a portfolio''.

### **Subsections**

Sections of a document can themselves be divided into subsections. For instance, you might have a section on Core Skills in your guide for teachers for Higher Latin, and each of the five Core Skills could have its own subsection.

It's true that numbering subsections or paragraphs can be useful for referring readers to particular bits of your document, but it also gives documents a very bureaucratic feel. A better and friendlier way to enable readers to find their way to the bit they want to look up, if they're interested in recording evidence, for instance, is to have a subheading saying 'recording evidence' and a listing on the contents page.

Don't number your paragraphs or subsections like this:

1

1.1

1.2 etc

unless it is in, for example, a committee paper, or an agenda.

For more information on headings and styles in Word documents, please see 'Guidelines for producing your publication' on the Publishing Portal.

## Appendices

Exercise caution if you're considering adding an appendix to your document. Exercise even more caution if you're thinking of adding more than one. Appendices do have a role, but they can be overused.

An appendix is a useful home for something which you think is helpful to understanding your text, but for which there is no room inside the text. It might, for instance, take up too much room, or it might disrupt the flow of what you are saying if you were to put it in the body of the text. Consider the disadvantages, though:

- ◆ First, if your readers need to read the information in an appendix before they can understand what you are saying, they will find themselves flicking backwards and forwards between the appendix and the text. You should avoid this at all costs.
- ◆ On the other hand, if they don't need to have the information that is in the appendix, they may well ignore it altogether.

The question you should ask yourself before adding an appendix to your document is whether what you are proposing is really so important. After all, if it were that important, you would want to put it in the main body of the text.

The sorts of thing you might want to put in an appendix include:

- ◆ health and safety requirements
- ◆ a list of legislation which has a bearing on what you have said
- ◆ statistics, included for the reader's interest
- ◆ a list of other publications to read
- ◆ forms that your readers might need to photocopy and use (though worked examples are, as a rule, better included with the text)

There are appendices at the back of this document. They contain additional information which supplements, but is not vital to, sections of this guide.

## Paragraphs

Like a section or a chapter, a paragraph is itself a small, self-contained unit. The trick is to express an idea, develop it, and then round it off. You should also link what you are saying with the idea being dealt with in the next paragraph.

## **Paragraph length**

A useful rule of thumb is that the ideal paragraph is five lines long and has three sentences. The first sentence states an idea:

‘Some candidates may find the language we use difficult to understand.’

The second takes the idea a bit further:

‘We can, though, do a number of simple things to make their lives easier.’

The third rounds the idea off, and links to the next paragraph:

‘Using shorter words and sentences is an important first step.

There is often a tendency in education to use language that is far too complicated...’

You won’t always be able to conform to this three-sentence rule — sometimes it just isn’t possible and you will find you are using two sentences or four or five. If you find, though, that your paragraphs are running to 10 lines or 15 lines, it may be that you are trying to express too many thoughts and ideas in the one go. Stop writing for a moment and try to find a way of breaking down what you are trying to say into smaller chunks.

You may find it helpful to draw up the same sort of plan for your paragraphs in each section as you did for the sections of the document. Imagine the section or subsection you are writing as a story. Plan how to get from beginning to end, and you will find that the steps you write down form, more or less, the basis of your paragraph structure.

## **Sentences**

A sentence should express one idea, simply, then stop. Don’t try to cram too many ideas in there. Break down what you have to say into smaller bits, and express each bit as a separate sentence.

A guideline: if you find that you are writing many sentences which contain more than 30 words, it is likely that readers are going to find them confusing.

## Cross-references and footnotes

### Cross-references

When you're referring to another publication in what you're writing, give the title of that publication in *italics*, like this:

'You will also find a very useful and detailed explanation of the various instruments of assessment you can use in the *Guide to Assessment and Quality Assurance*.'

When you're referring to another section in your own publication, or to a section of another publication, give the name of the section in quotation marks, like this:

'You will also find a very useful and detailed explanation of the various instruments of assessment you can use in the *Guide to Assessment, Assessment instruments*'.'

### Footnotes

Please try to avoid giving footnotes in any piece of writing which is for public consumption. Footnotes can appear intimidating, so it is better to give whatever information it is that you want to convey in the body of your text.

If you have to use a footnote, use a superscript number, like this.<sup>1</sup> The footnote should be separated from the text by a rule, and should be two points smaller than body text.

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<sup>1</sup> The result will be a note like this. Word can do it for you automatically.

## 3 Using words

### Accessibility

All SQA publications (and everything else we write) should be accessible to everyone, and should reflect an inclusive view of society. Any examples, tasks, images, and language used should mirror this view.

- ◆ Check your text for any cultural references. SQA's materials are increasingly used by people whose first language is not English.
- ◆ Use plain English. Almost all disability rights groups stress the importance of using language that is easy to understand.
- ◆ Use the 'Styles and Formatting' function to apply heading styles in Microsoft Word. This will make the text accessible to someone using a screen reader. Contact the Word Processing team if you are not sure how to use styles.
- ◆ Only use diagrams and photographs to complement the written text. Try not to rely solely on pictures to explain a particular point — someone using a screen reader could be disadvantaged. Any images must be given a visual description as alternative text. (Use 'Format picture', select the 'Web' tab, and enter the description in the 'Alternative text' field.)
- ◆ Can you envisage any barriers that might restrict a task or activity from being carried out? For example, a task asking an IT candidate to use a mouse to carry out an action will cause problems for someone with motor difficulties. Give alternative ways to carry out the task such as using the keyboard.
- ◆ For subject-specific materials, consider how accessible the qualification is itself, and think about the tasks and activities to be carried out based on this. For example, it is unlikely that a qualification in Welding would be accessible to a blind candidate.

SQA can produce material on request in audio, Braille and other alternative formats for disabled customers, including those with learning difficulties.

Promoting equality is something SQA takes very seriously. You can find more about equality at: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/25340.html>.

## Formality of language

### How to address readers

You should try to address your readers personally (unless it's impossible, because you're generating letters from a large mailing list, for instance). This makes text easier to understand and less intimidating. It also makes us seem less bureaucratic to outsiders reading our publications.

As an example, consider the first sentence in that last paragraph. There are other ways of expressing this idea. Here's a list, in increasing degrees of remoteness:

- ◆ You should always try to address the reader personally.
- ◆ It is better to address the reader personally.
- ◆ Writers should address readers personally.
- ◆ The writer should address the reader personally.
- ◆ Readers should be addressed personally.
- ◆ Reader address should be personal in tone.

There's sometimes a tendency for the tone of writing which deals with educational or organisational subjects to be pitched at or around the bottom end of this list, in remote and formal language, but there's really no need for this to be so. As a guideline, bear this in mind: if it's something you wouldn't consider saying in speech, don't write it down.

Almost all our procedural documents are written for people in centres who are doing the organising and administration which running our qualifications demands. Once you've made this plain in an introduction, there is no reason why you shouldn't then address these people as 'you' throughout the text, rather than referring to 'centres'.

So, don't say: 'Centres should retain candidates' work for verification', if it would be just as easy to say: 'You should retain candidates' work for verification'.

Similarly, a lot of what we write is written for teachers and tutors. If you're writing for teachers and tutors, say so and then address them personally — call them 'you', not 'teachers/tutors'. They may pay more attention to what you have to say, and will find it easier to understand.

### **Elision (you're, we're, here's, etc)**

Elision or contractions are perfectly appropriate in most circumstances: in newsletters, anything labelled as 'guidance', and anything addressed to teachers, lecturers, people in the workplace, or candidates. It's perhaps less appropriate in procedural documents, or Arrangements documents — documents that have an almost legal tone — but these are the exception rather than the rule.

Don't feel that you can't use 'don't' or 'can't' or 'you're', and if it helps you to write in a more natural style (because it's closer to the way you speak), use it. It is always better, when you're writing a first draft, to be too informal than to be too formal. Informality is an aid to clarity.

### **Passives**

Be wary of passives — a passive clause is one in which *x is done by y*. In the vast majority of cases, the sort of sentence you should be using is active, where *y does x*.

There are, of course, some things that are better expressed as passives, but passives do de-personalise text and make it seem very remote from the reader. The more passives there are in a text, the more this is reinforced. The effect this has is to give readers the impression that we are bureaucratic and distant (which is not the way we are at all). So, when you are, for instance, explaining our policy, don't say 'it has been decided', say 'we have decided'.

If you're giving advice, don't say 'it is recommended ...', say 'we recommend ...'.

Similarly, avoid constructions like 'centres are advised ...'.

## Jargon

Highly specialised language with many technical terms is not always easy to avoid, but there are steps you can take to minimise the bafflement readers feel. There may be other words for ‘articulate’ (in the specialised sense in which we use it) and for ‘implementation’. Please try to find alternatives.

We also have a tendency to say things like ‘the entering of candidates for examinations’ when we could just as easily say ‘entering candidates for examinations’. Avoid this sort of construction, because it can seem pompous and mystifying.

### Don’t write

the recording of evidence  
the entering of candidates  
the implementation of SQA qualifications  
the use of

### Write

recording evidence  
entering candidates  
implementing SQA qualifications  
using

## Speaking about people

When you’re speaking about people other than your readers (whom you should always address as ‘you’), speak about them in the plural. This will apply, for instance, when you’re speaking about candidates in a guide for teachers and tutors.

There are two reasons for this. If you speak about them in the singular, you will find yourself using phrases like ‘the candidate can progress to other qualifications’, which is objective and de-personalised, and makes the candidate sound like a thing rather than a person. Also, you will get into trouble when you’re using pronouns and find that you are having to say ‘he or she’ all the time. Using the plural gets around this because you can use the neutral ‘they’.

It’s not really wrong to use ‘they’ for a single person (eg to say ‘if a candidate is ill, they might be eligible for special consideration’), but some people are uncomfortable writing (or reading) this kind of construction. If you’re one of them, don’t use it. Don’t, however, worry about it, as worrying about this kind of thing gets in the way of clear expression.

## Repetition

Repetition is a problem in two ways:

**Redundancy:** we have a tendency to try to tell our readers the whole story all the time. We will, for instance, tell them about verification, which makes us feel we have to tell them about the whole quality assurance system. This in turn makes us want to explain the approval criteria, even if we have already done so. If you've explained internal verification once, there's no need to explain it again — use a cross-reference.

**Stylistically:** a simple style check you can do before handing over your finished copy is to read over what you have written to see whether there are certain phrases or words you have overused. Just looking at a printed page often helps you see at a glance whether there's anything obvious you've repeated.

If, for instance, you've started four consecutive sentences with 'SQA', the text would read better if you changed at least two of these.

Similarly, if you're presenting a list of options which are expressed in similar language, try to vary them. If bullet points start with the same word or phrase, move this back behind the colon introducing the list. Not:

'In addition, many people have found that:

- ◆ National Units are great
- ◆ National Units are brilliant
- ◆ National Units are flexible
- ◆ National Units are very good indeed'

But:

'In addition, many people have found that National Units are:

- ◆ great
- ◆ brilliant
- ◆ flexible
- ◆ very good indeed'

## Good words and bad words

### Plain English

Plain English isn't just about the words you choose — it has to do with sentence construction, sentence length, clarity of expression, and many other things besides — but words are a good place to start.

### What's a good word to use?

This is a difficult question to answer in detail. We can't give you a list of words to choose from and say 'don't use any others', because the words you use will depend on your subject matter, and how comprehensibly you are using them depends on their context. In general, though, good words are plain, simple and easy to understand.

You have a degree of freedom to choose whether to use only short words or mainly short words but a few big ones, depending on your audience. If you're writing for candidates with learning difficulties, for instance, the words (and sentences, and paragraphs) you use must be as simple as possible. If you're writing for college staff or schoolteachers, you can use more complex constructions. The important thing is to be as direct and unambiguous as possible. Everyone would rather have a simple text to read than a difficult one.

### What's a bad word?

Any word is bad if people aren't going to understand what you're trying to say with it. There is, for instance, little point in using a word like 'architectonic' in a piece of writing, because no-one reading it will know what you mean. Similarly, it's all very well knowing what 'lugubrious' means, but are you using it just to show off? Why not use 'sad' or 'mournful' instead?

Try to avoid using big words derived from Latin (words ending in '-tion', '-ment' or '-ise' for instance) if you can think of a simpler way of saying what you want to say. So, if you can say 'help' instead of 'contribution'; or 'carry out' rather than 'implement', do so.

A guideline: the more syllables there are in a word, the more reluctant you should be to use it.

## **A word about nouns**

### **Collective nouns**

These words (eg government, Scottish Enterprise, HM Inspectorate) sometimes look as if they're plural, but we use them as singular. So, for instance, you should say:

'the Government is doing this' *not* 'the Government are doing this'.

The same is true for 'SQA':

'SQA is responsible for...' not 'SQA are responsible for...'  
(though, of course, you can say 'we are responsible for...')

### **Nouns as adjectives**

Please try not to use nouns as adjectives. In the phrase 'candidate evidence judgement record', every word is a noun, as is every word in 'school curriculum unit information pack'.

At best, this sort of construction is unattractive. At worst, it can be confusing, or even incomprehensible. This is because there are several possible ways for readers to guess the meaning. Is a 'candidate evidence judgement record' a record of candidates' judgements about evidence, a record of judgements about evidence of candidates, a record of judgements about candidates' evidence, or a record of evidence judgements about candidates? Are some, or all, of these the same? It takes unnecessary time and effort to work this out.

The best thing to do is to try to work strings of nouns into grammatical forms. This may involve using a couple of extra words here and there, but you will find that the sense you want to convey comes across more clearly. The two examples we gave earlier would be better given as: 'a record of judgements of candidates' evidence' and 'an information pack for schools on Units in the curriculum'.

Similarly, try to avoid turning nouns into verbs, which can also be confusing. For instance, instead of 'mainstreaming e-assessment', try 'making e-assessment mainstream'.

## The ‘think twice’ list

Many newspapers and publishers have ‘hate lists’ of words which are so overused that they would appear in every single story unless the paper took drastic action to prevent it. A paper will ban these words from ever appearing in print. Read the *Sunday Times* and see if you can spot an occurrence of the words ‘major’ or ‘current’. There should be very few in this paper. ‘Very’ can also be used unnecessarily.

We are not banning the words in this list. We are saying please try not to use them as they are a) hugely overused, and b) often a sign of sloppy thinking or writing.

**a number of:** This is a vague, woolly, and bureaucratic phrase. Don’t use it — say ‘some’ instead. If you absolutely must use it, remember that it takes a plural verb, not a singular — ‘a number of people *are* concerned’ not ‘a number of people *is* concerned’.

**appropriate:** This word often means nothing, as in the phrase ‘SQA staff will give the appropriate advice and guidance’. If you say we will give people ‘appropriate advice’, does this mean that they sometimes get inappropriate advice from us, or that they think they might? Instead of using the word, either say what the appropriate advice might be, or miss out the word altogether.

**articulate:** This really means ‘to say’, but is sometimes used to mean ‘to lead on to’, or ‘to progress’. Please use the simpler alternatives.

**associated:** should never be used as an adjective. The phrase ‘this Performance Criterion and its associated Evidence Requirements’, for instance, is confusing because you wonder which Evidence Requirements for the Performance Criterion are the associated ones, and which are not.

**at this point in time** and its cousin **at this moment in time** are vogueish in some circles, but raise most people’s hackles. Don’t use them.

**implementation:** We use this word to mean ‘setting up’ qualifications so that they can be delivered or ‘putting them into practice’ so that candidates can take them. Don’t use ‘implementation’ to mean teaching, training or assessment.

**in relation to:** This crops up all the time in phrases like ‘SQA’s policy in relation to ...’. You should always be able to replace it with ‘on’ or ‘about’, or to miss it out altogether.

**indicate:** can sometimes be replaced by ‘show’.

**inform:** can almost always be replaced by ‘tell’.

**particular and specific:** These are very widely used, but very rarely mean anything. If you feel a temptation to use either of them, read your sentence over and ask yourself what ‘particular’ means in ‘the particular candidate’. Nine times out of 10 you will be able to dispense with it altogether. The same goes for ‘specific’. This may seem like quibbling, but, as we’ve said before, using words which add nothing to the meaning of a phrase makes that phrase harder to understand.

**relevant:** One of the most overused words in our vocabulary. In a phrase like ‘after consultation with relevant staff’, what meaning does the word add? Do people regularly consult with irrelevant staff?

**within:** means ‘inside’. Don’t use ‘within’ if you mean ‘in’. You almost always mean ‘in’. There is no meaningful sense in which anything can be ‘within’ a qualification, or ‘within’ a context. You can, though, be within a building, and things can happen within an organisation (if they happen exclusively inside it).

### **General think twice list**

This think twice list applies more generally than to our publications. It’s based on Plain English Campaign guidelines for, well, plain English.

#### **Try not to write:**

assist

therefore

prior to

until such time as

consequently

as indicated above

as itemised below

as mentioned previously

#### **Instead, write:**

help

so

before

until

then

as we’ve already said, or see the section on ...

here is a list

as we’ve already said

as regards/with regard to	about
in relation to	about, of
for the purposes of	for
in order to	to
within (unless you mean 'inside')	in
additional	more
further	more
have responsibility for	be in charge of, deal with
by means of	by
consist of	be made up of
constitutes	is, makes, builds up to
effect (as verb)	make, do
facilitate	help
function	role, work, job
in accordance with	under, following
in addition	also, as well
in conjunction with	with
legislation	law, laws
necessitate	cause
obtain	get
proficiency	skill
capability	ability
regarding	about, on, to, of
relating to	about, on, to, of
require to	need to, have to
sufficient	enough
terminate	end, stop, finish
undertake	do, try for
utilise	use
with reference to	about

## Words that confuse

### Can and may

If you want to say that it is possible for candidates to be assessed by examination, don't say 'candidates *may* be assessed by examination' unless you're giving people permission (which implies to the reader that you are in a position of authority and superiority). 'May' can also express a vague possibility, as in 'it may rain this afternoon, or it may not'.

'Can' expresses simple capability, and is almost always the word you want.

So:

- ◆ candidates can be assessed by examination
- ◆ publications can be ordered from our Customer Contact Centre
- ◆ the school liaison officer can be contacted on ...

### Should and must

'Should' means a recommendation, or a piece of advice. 'You *should* listen to what this guide is saying' is not an order, but a way of urging you to take note. 'Must', on the other hand, means compulsion, and the lack of alternatives, as in 'you *must* signal your intention to pull out before manoeuvring away from the kerb'.

You must not be afraid of using 'must', if it is appropriate to do so. If, for instance, people in centres have to submit results using a certain form, tell them so. 'You *must* use form 1 for submitting results.' Don't feel that you have to use 'should', simply because it seems politer — it could cause confusion.

### A or an?

The principal rule here is to be guided by pronunciation.

Use 'a' before words beginning with 'h', unless the 'h' is silent — a history, a hope, a Higher pass; an heir, an honours degree.

Before abbreviations where the letters are sounded as letters, use 'an' before A, E, F, H, I, L, M, N, O, R, S, and X — 'an SVQ, an HND, a PDA'.

### **That or which?**

This is a source of confusion, and there's no hard and fast rule. It helps your reader, though, if you use 'that' to introduce a defining clause:

'The dogs that barked in the night did not recognise the thief.'

And use 'which' to introduce a describing clause:

'The dogs, which barked in the night, did not recognise the thief.'

In the first example, 'The dogs that barked' suggests there were other dogs that did not bark. In the second, we can be more confident that all the dogs barked (and the comma between 'dogs' and 'which' helps). If you use 'that' and 'which' in this way you can help your reader work out whether or not all the dogs barked.

A good rule of thumb is that, if you're in any doubt about whether to use 'that' or 'which', you should use 'that'. However, when writing about a person or people, you should always use 'who'.

## Some myths about words and grammar

These are also known as ‘shibboleths’. The important thing about them is that you shouldn’t waste your time worrying about them. They get in the way of clear expression of your thoughts. Try to forget all about them.

### **Myth: You musn’t use prepositions at the end of sentences**

Prepositions relate nouns or pronouns to the rest of a sentence and include words like ‘with’, ‘on’ and ‘at’. So, traditionally, putting them at the end of a sentence was frowned on. However, this inspired the following quote from Winston Churchill:

*‘From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I shall not put.’*

If a preposition is going to fall at the end of a sentence naturally, let it stay there. Go on. It happens naturally in English, and is something we should all be perfectly comfortable with.

### **Myth: You musn’t use split infinitives**

There aren’t actually any infinitives in English — instead we have a form consisting of ‘to’ with the verb stem — so it follows that you can’t really split an infinitive. You may be uncomfortable, though, with the idea of putting something between your ‘to’ and your verb stem, but don’t go out of your way to avoid it, especially when you’re saying something like ‘to fully appreciate’, or ‘to completely understand’.

### **Myth: You must always use ‘you and I’**

There’s no rule that says you always have to say ‘you and I’ — it’s often ‘you and me’.

If you’d say ‘me’ when there was no ‘you and’, say ‘you and me’: ‘According to you and me, done by you and me, arranged for you and me’.

If you’d say ‘I’ when there was no ‘you and’, say ‘I’: ‘You and I should meet, you and I know, you and I are too old for this’.

### **Myth: Every ‘if’ requires a ‘then’**

It’s not necessary to introduce the complement of every conditional with a ‘then’. The meaning is usually quite plain from the context, and saying ‘then’ can actually confuse people, who might read ‘then’ as a reference to a time. For instance, ‘If you worry about tomorrow, you won’t sleep’ is perfectly straightforward. ‘If you worry about tomorrow, then you won’t sleep’ introduces an unnecessary ambiguity, because you can read it as saying ‘you won’t sleep tomorrow if you worry about tomorrow’.

### **Use of shall**

It’s not necessary to use ‘shall’ for the first person (I and we) future. Use ‘will’. Indeed, it’s not necessary to use ‘shall’ at all — it sounds a bit pompous or portentous — and its use is declining rapidly, even in England.

*Shall is not used in Scotland, except on the railways, and then incorrectly.*

### **However... avoid looking silly**

There are a few constructions and ways of writing that regularly cause embarrassment or hilarity when they’re read by people who receive material from us, or when they’re quoted in the press. It’s not worth worrying about these as you write if doing so is going to get in the way of expressing yourself, but do check for them when you give your material a final read over.

### **Apostrophes**

Don’t use them with the ordinary plural ‘s’. Don’t say ‘The SVQ’s are accredited...’, ‘candidate’s are forbidden to use calculators...’ and so on.

It’s very difficult, especially when you’re in a hurry, to get all of your ‘its’ and ‘it’s’s right. Be careful — check what you’ve written.

See the section ‘Other punctuation’ for more examples.

### **Past participles**

‘We have took a copy for our records’, ‘have you forgot to inform us...?’, and phrases like these, do get into newspaper diaries and bulletin boards. If you’re not sure what form of a word to use, ask someone else. It’s always a good idea to get someone else to read over what you’ve written in any case.

## 4 Punctuation

### General

Punctuation is your friend (and, more importantly, your reader's). It shows where one bit of what you're saying stops and another begins. It tells people which words and phrases on the page belong together and which are separate. Don't ignore it. Stops, and especially commas, make a very important contribution to making your text easy to understand — in this sense, the stop key and the comma key are among the most important on your keyboard.

### Commas

Commas are important. They're used in two ways: to separate clauses in sentences, and to separate small items in lists.

### Clauses

If you think of what you're writing as speech, you can think of commas as the places where you'd pause (as you would after 'speech' in this sentence). If you're unsure about whether to insert a comma or not, try reading your sentence aloud. The places where you pause are almost always crying out for a comma. If you're still unsure, insert a comma anyway.

Using commas really helps people to understand what you're saying, because it breaks your statements down into bite-sized chunks. Here's a moderately complex sentence with no commas:

'Interim reviews throughout the year will follow the same pattern as your annual review and will concentrate on your progress against agreed objectives noting any changes in objectives and progress towards achievement of your personal development plan.'

It's particularly confusing around the 'objectives noting' area. Here it is broken down into chunks, and much easier on the reader's eye and brain:

'Interim reviews throughout the year will follow the same pattern as your annual review, and will concentrate on your progress against agreed objectives, noting any changes in objectives and progress towards achievement of your personal development plan.'

## **Lists**

We use what is known to editors as 'full Oxford stopping' in lists, because lists (especially the lists we use) can get so complicated. The rule is that all the items are separated by commas (or by semi-colons if the items are large) even those final items preceded by 'and'. Here's an example:

'Engineering, Personal and Interpersonal Skills, Communication, Art and Design, and Information Technology.'

Given that our lists get even more complicated than this, it is best to be as rigorous as possible in marking off one item from another, and the way to do this is by using commas.

If your list contains items that are more than a few words long, though, use semi-colons.

## **Stops**

Full stops (sometimes know as 'full points') mark the ends of sentences. We do not use them in abbreviations or acronyms.

## **Abbreviations**

The abbreviation which shows that you are giving an example is:

eg (not e.g. or eg.)

The abbreviation for 'that is' is:

ie (not i.e. or ie.)

Both 'eg' and 'ie', if you choose to use them, should follow a dash — eg like this — or a comma, ie like this, or should be in a bracket.

When you want an abbreviation for 'and so on', you should write

etc (not &c. or etc.)

You should, though, use 'etc' with caution — don't just put one in to be on the safe side, or when you can't think of anything else to go in the list, etc. Have a real reason for it.

You must also avoid using more than one of these abbreviations in any clause — you should never write:

eg English, French, German, Gaelic, etc

Write:

English, French, German, Gaelic, etc

or:

eg English, French, German, Gaelic

Write acronyms, abbreviations, and titles like this:

BBC, IBM, HIE, UHI, Mr Blair, Dr Foster

ie with no stops.

## Emphasis

Keep emphasis to a minimum or you won't be able to see the wood for the trees. If you want to emphasise text in a professional document — use **bold**. You can also use bold to highlight **new terms** in learning and teaching materials. Don't use underlining to emphasise text, as screen readers won't be able to read it, and use italics for titles of Units and publications (see 'Capital letters' on p16).

## Other punctuation

### Quotation marks

Always use single quotes (‘ ’) when citing speech or quoting from a text.

Double quotes (” ”) can only be used for quotes within quotes, like this:

‘So I said to him, “What do you think you’re doing?” and I meant it, I can tell you.’

You are unlikely to need to use this sort of construction often when writing for SQA.

### Apostrophes

Apostrophes have two functions:

- ◆ They indicate possession, as in ‘Overall, **candidates**’ results in this subject show much improvement’.
- ◆ They show that a letter (or more than one) has been missed out, as in ‘I very much regret that I **didn’t** respond to your letter’.

Apostrophes are never used to show that a noun is plural (this is known as the ‘greengrocer’s apostrophe’, as in ‘**apple’s** and **pear’s** 45p’ or ‘**room’s** 24 and 25’).

The plural form of SVQ is SVQs, **not** SVQ’s.

### Difficult apostrophes

These are the rules on when to use **’s** [apostrophe s] and when to use **s’** [s apostrophe] in cases which can cause confusion:

Singular words which end in the letter **s** take **’s** [apostrophe s] in the possessive:

- ◆ this chair is my boss’s
- ◆ James’s wombat
- ◆ the princess’s didgeridoo

Their plurals take **s’** [s apostrophe]:

- ◆ bosses’ cars
- ◆ princesses’ privileges

Plurals which don't end in **s** take **'s** [apostrophe s] in the possessive:

- ◆ children's books
- ◆ sheep's clothing

### **No apostrophe**

The difference between **its** and **it's** is that **its** is possessive, and **it's** is a short form of **it is**.

- ◆ The one thing about Scotland I don't like is its weather.
- ◆ Oh look, it's raining again.

Beware of situations where these two are easily confused:

- ◆ The great thing about the SVQ is its adaptability.
- ◆ The great thing about the SVQ is that it's adaptable.

There is no apostrophe in the name of a decade:

- ◆ the 1980s

not

- ◆ the 1980's

### **Colons and semi-colons**

There are two uses for a colon. The first is to introduce a list of things: Group Awards, Courses, Units, and Performance Criteria, for instance. The second is to link two phrases of equal weight in one sentence, where there is an idea of progression: as there is here. You can also use a dash in these circumstances.

Semi-colons are used to distinguish between the items in a list where it would be confusing to do so by using simple commas, as in this example:

'SQA works in partnership with education, business and government to ensure that its qualifications are: relevant to the needs of students and employers; flexible enough to adapt to changing economic circumstances and technological change; and recognised throughout the UK, Europe, and beyond.'

If you find yourself using a sentence like this, though, it would almost always be better to try to use a list of bullets instead.

Don't use a colon followed by a hyphen ( :- ).

## Bullets

Bullets are widely used, and there is no reason why this shouldn't continue. After all, bullet points are:

- ◆ easy to read
- ◆ visually striking
- ◆ clean and neat

Bullet points should not be capitalised when they are incomplete sentences that cannot be read on their own without the stem (as in the example above). In this case, they should not finish with commas or semicolons.

Bullets should be capitalised, and end with full stops, when the text forms a complete sentence that can exist on its own. For example:

'There are numerous benefits of using bullet points:

- ◆ They are useful for lists, allowing the reader to determine the main points easily.
- ◆ They break up long sections of text. This will help improve the readability of the document.'

Another thing to bear in mind if you are using bullets is that they must agree in logic. You can't, for instance, say something like this:

'The number of candidates taking the qualification:

- ◆ has reached a peak
- ◆ is expected to continue increasing for several years'

A list of bullets should also make grammatical sense: decide whether the bulleted text should continue your original sentence or start a new one, and stick with your decision.

For example, here's how the bullets at the top of this section should **not** look:

'Bullet points are:

- ◆ easy to read
- ◆ they are striking, visually
- ◆ bullet points are clean and neat'

Having said all this, you also have to be wary of overusing bullets, as too many bullet points make a text hard to read. If you have more than three separate sets of bullets on a page (ie bullets in more than three paragraphs) it may be time for a rethink.

## Dashes

Dashes have two similar uses:

- ◆ You can put an explanatory phrase — like this one — in long dashes in the middle of a sentence. You can't, though, use more than one pair of dashes per sentence. You can use brackets instead of dashes.
- ◆ You can link two equally important phrases with a long dash where you don't want to start a new sentence — much as you might use a colon. It is better to use a long dash than a colon in these circumstances.

The keyboard shortcut for a long dash is alt 0151.

## Hyphens

There is no consistent rule on when to hyphen and when not, but a general principle is that two words should be hyphenated if:

- ◆ they are more closely related to each other than to the other words in the sentence
- ◆ it is more confusing not to hyphen them

Consider the phrase 'temporary evidence record'. Without hyphens it is unclear whether it is the evidence that is temporary or the record — if the latter sense is meant, then 'temporary evidence-record' would be clearer. Note, though, that it would be better still to recast the phrase, for instance as 'temporary record of evidence' (see 'Nouns as adjectives' in the section 'Good and bad words').

Always hyphen these terms:

- ◆ centre-devised
- ◆ work-based
- ◆ candidate-centred
- ◆ part-time (and full-time)
- ◆ project-based
- ◆ nationally-recognised
- ◆ vocationally-focused

Always use a hyphen before 'oriented' and 'based' when they are being used in a compound — eg 'people-oriented approach' or 'work-based learning'.

## **Ellipsis**

The mark we use for ellipsis (which you should use when you want to show that a chunk of text has been left out of a passage you are quoting) is three points ... like this. Here's an example:

'The mark we use for ellipsis ... is three points' (alt ctrl <full stop>).

There is always a space before the ellipsis character, except when it comes at the beginning of a quoted sentence.

## **Placing more than one kind of punctuation mark**

This happens when you've been reporting speech, or you have text in parentheses (like this). The rule is simple — if a whole sentence falls between quotation marks:

'You should seriously consider enrolling for the HND.'

or between parentheses:

(Please bear in mind that this is all true.)

the full stop also falls within the quotation marks or parentheses.

## 5 Numbers; money, weights and measures; dates and time

### Numbers

The rules for giving numbers in text are:

- ◆ The numbers one to nine should be written out in full, as they have been here unless they are part of a series of numerical data. The numbers 10 and above should be given as figures.
- ◆ In tables, equations, etc, only use figures.
- ◆ Always give exact measurements in figures — this applies to money, quantities, and time, as well as to the credit value of a qualification, or its level.
- ◆ When using figures, insert commas: 1,300 or 103,000.
- ◆ At the beginning of a sentence, always either write the number out in full, even if it is greater than 10:

‘Results have shown improvement this year. Thirty-one candidates achieved grade C.’

Or, recast the sentence. Recasting the sentence is the better option for numbers which are greater than 100 — don’t write:

‘Thirty-one thousand six hundred and seven candidates achieved grade C’.

Write: ‘The number of candidates achieving grade C was 31,607’.

Note that compound numbers written out in text (thirty-one, sixty-seven, and so on) should be hyphenated. To show a range of values, use a short dash (3–15 curriculum, 100–150 candidates, etc). The keyboard shortcut for a short dash is alt 0150. Note that a short dash is slightly longer than a hyphen, which has its own key.

## Money, weights and measures

The pound sign (£) and the pence sign (p) must never be used at the same time. Use £0.84 or 84p — but keep to one style within a document. There must always be two digits after the decimal point, unless there are no pence, when the amount can be typed as £7.

This rule also applies to the Euro and cent, the US dollar and cent, and all other currencies.

Insert a space between the number and the unit of measurement, eg 25 mm, 89 g.

Use either 25% or 25 per cent — but keep to one style within a document.

## Dates and time

Dates should not be punctuated. Our preferred style for dates is day month year: 1 June 2011. The easy way to remember this is to remember that the units of time start small (1) on the left, and end up big (2011) on the right.

Ensure dates appear in one line and are not separated by a line break. For example, writing 1 June 2011 would be fine, whereas writing something like 1 June 2011 wouldn't.

The preferred style for times is the twelve-hour clock with 'am' or 'pm'. Give the value in figures separated by a stop and with a space before 'am' or 'pm', as in these examples:

'I suggest we meet at my office at 12.30 pm on 23 May. Please let me know whether this is suitable.

If it is not suitable, I'll also be available on 26 May after 2 pm.'

### Range of years

If you have to give a range of years (for instance if you're talking about an academic session), use a short dash, and miss out the first two characters if they're the same in both dates. So, 2007–08, but 1997–2007. Alternatively, you can write it out in full: from 1997 to 2007, but you mustn't mix the two methods (from 1997–2007).

### **Seasons of the year**

There's no need to give an initial capital to the names of the seasons — spring, summer, autumn or winter — unless they are occurring as part of the proper name of something, eg *Summer Lightning*, *The Lion in Winter*. In ordinary use, lower case is better, eg 'let's discuss this again in the spring'.

### **Phone numbers**

Put a space between the STD part of the number (eg 0141, 0131) and the next three digits, then another after those, eg 0141 278 1000, 0131 561 1000.

For mobile phone numbers, where there's no STD as such, insert a space after the first four or five digits to leave a group of six or seven to the right.

# Appendix 1: Caution

## Examples of nonsense

The sentence below is taken from the first page of an SVQ guide that tries to explain how to deliver an SVQ that is also part of the regulatory framework for the industry. The sentence is meant to explain what the document is trying to achieve. See if you can make sense of it:

'The guidance notes therefore demonstrate practically how evidence might be gathered such that<sup>1</sup> competence is evidenced<sup>2</sup> sufficient to meet the requirements<sup>3</sup> of both the SVQ Awarding Body<sup>4</sup> and also<sup>5</sup> the specific demands<sup>6</sup> of the regulator and in a manner<sup>7</sup> which illustrates the added value offered by the above specific standards<sup>8</sup> in promoting compliance<sup>9</sup> and associated best practice.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that the SVQ ties in with the regulatory framework does make things more complicated, but that is all the more reason to use simple language.

There are (at least) ten things wrong with the sentence, apart from the fact that it is far too long.

- 1 'how evidence might be gathered such that' — why not say 'how you can gather evidence so that ...'?
- 2 'competence is evidenced' — two things are wrong with this: 'evidence' is not a verb, and the phrase is passive. Why not say 'the evidence proves your competence'?
- 3 'is evidenced sufficient to meet the requirements' — this is ungrammatical, and too complicated. 'The evidence proves your competence and meets the requirements' is better.
- 4 'Awarding Body' does not need capitals.
- 5 'and also' — too many words. A simple 'and' would have been fine.
- 6 'the specific demands of the regulator...' — the specific demands as opposed to what other sort of demands? Do they have vague, woolly demands, or do they make demands which have nothing to do with the industry?
- 7 'manner' — 'way' would have been simpler.
- 8 'the above specific standards' — is this supposed to mean any more than 'these standards'? If so, what?
- 9 'compliance' — but we are not told what is being complied with.

10 'associated best practice' — again, we are not told what the best practice is associated with, making the word meaningless.

Instead, why not try: 'The guidance notes show how to gather evidence to prove your competence and meet the SVQ awarding body's requirements. They also show the added value of these standards.'

### **Two shorter examples**

These are more or less grammatical — it's just that you have to look at them for a long time to work out what their authors meant.

'Currently the volume of external assessment is higher in History at Intermediate 2 and Higher is greater in History than it is in Modern Studies and Geography.'

'Within, and between, societies there are different conceptualisations of school and instructional process variables, different operationalisations even where the conceptualisation is similar and different measurement procedures and instruments even where the operationalisations are the same.'

The problem with the first is the two different senses of 'higher' being used so close together. Why not try: 'At the moment, there is more external assessment in History at Intermediate 2. At Higher, there is more external assessment in History than in Modern Studies and Geography.'

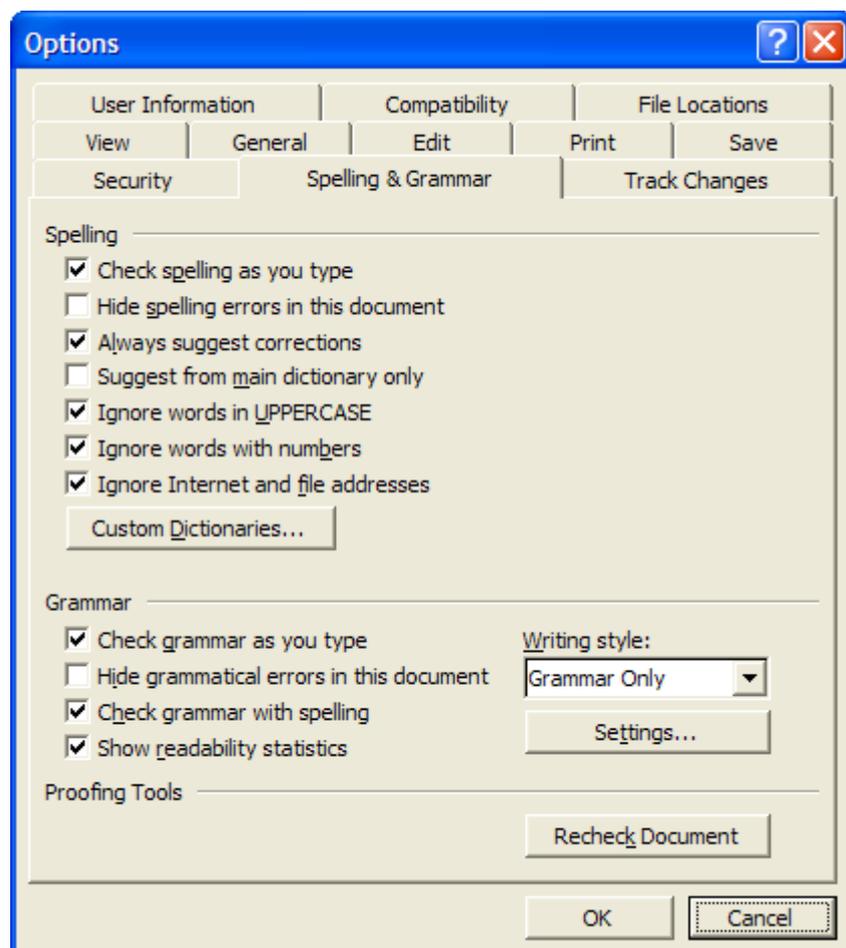
The second really means that 'school' and 'teaching' mean different things to different people, and that even when they mean similar things, the way teaching is done in schools can be very different. Why not just say that, though?

## Appendix 2: A useful tool in Word

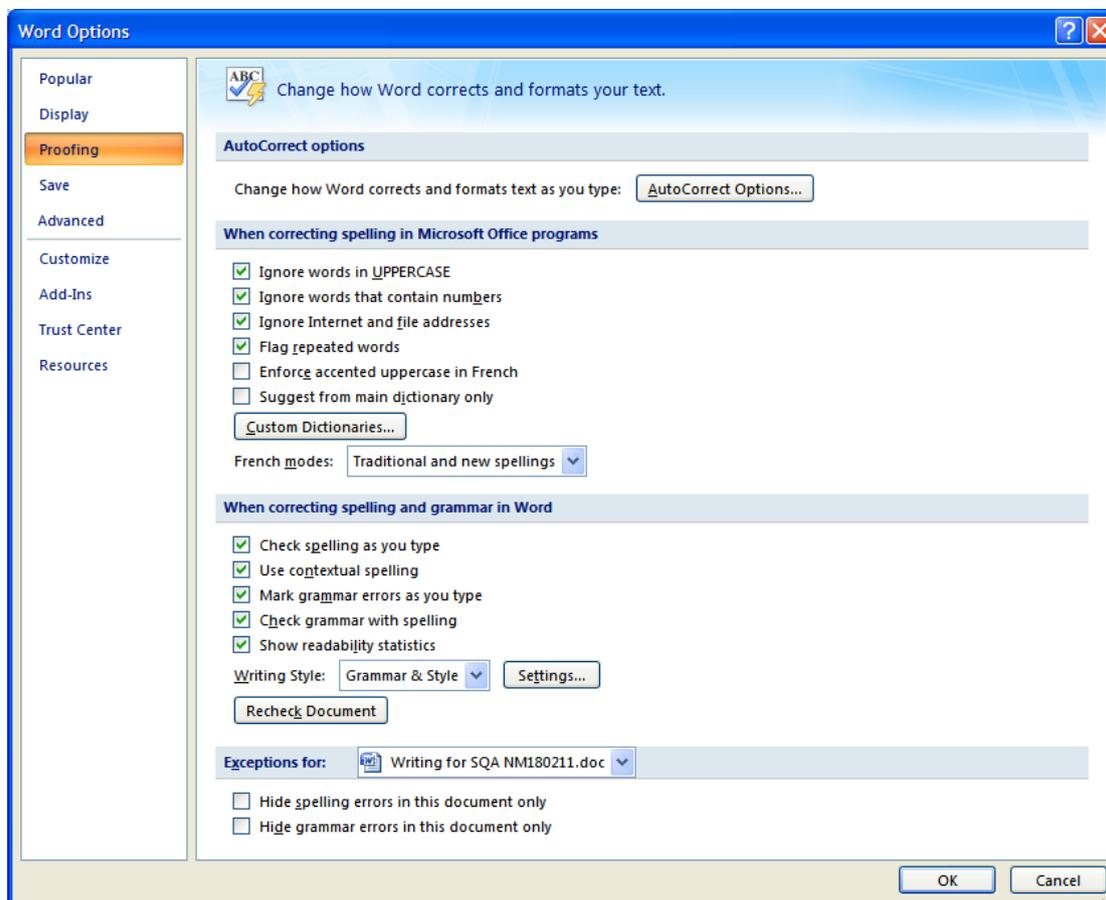
Always use the spellchecker, though you'll have to decide whether the suggestion offered is indeed correct. Remember we use 'organise' not 'organize'. (Most versions of Word's spelling dictionary contain some errors, eg 'liaise' is usually mis-spelled as 'liase'). Before you use the spellchecker, please make sure that your document's language is set as UK English (go to Tools>Language>Set language).

You can take your checking a bit further with a little application that will tell you how readable your writing is.

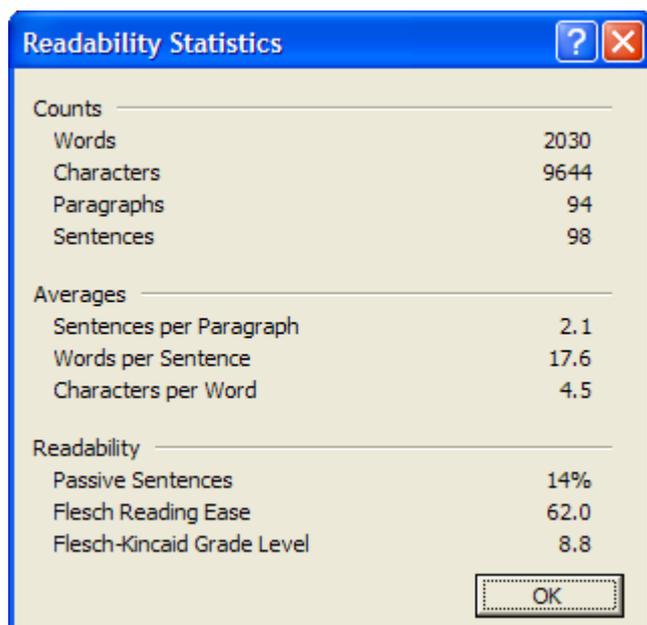
If you have Word 2003 you'll need to go to Tools>Options, and then choose the 'Spelling & Grammar' tab. There, under 'Grammar', make sure the following options are ticked:



If you have Word 2007, you'll need to go to the Office Button (top left on your screen), select Word Options, select Proofing, and finally select 'Show readability statistics' in the 'When correcting spelling and grammar in Word' section.



Now, whenever you spellcheck a document, you'll also get an assessment of its readability. The assessment is based on average sentence length, the number of difficult words, the number of passive sentences, and paragraph length. The final score you're given is called the 'Flesch reading ease' score, and will look like this:



The screenshot shows a dialog box titled 'Readability Statistics' with a blue header bar containing a question mark icon and a close button. The dialog is divided into three sections: 'Counts', 'Averages', and 'Readability'. Each section contains a list of metrics and their corresponding values.

Counts	
Words	2030
Characters	9644
Paragraphs	94
Sentences	98

Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	2.1
Words per Sentence	17.6
Characters per Word	4.5

Readability	
Passive Sentences	14%
Flesch Reading Ease	62.0
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	8.8

An 'OK' button is located at the bottom right of the dialog box.

You can ignore the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, which is based on the reading ages attained in US school grades. The important figure is above this. The higher the figure (it's a percentage), the better. You should be aiming for 40 and over, though in a complex document, 32 is just about acceptable. If your score is low, you can use the information under 'Averages' to improve it.

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