Writing for SQA

(A to Z version)

About this guide

Writing for SQA is for everyone in the organisation. Whether you are writing an email, a report, an assessment item, or a web page — this guide is for you.

The topics in the list on the next page are hyperlinks to explanations and examples that we hope you will find helpful. Most of the topics are no more than half a page in length but some extend to a few pages. If you can't find an entry for a particular topic, try using the Find function in the PDF version of this guide.

If you are new to SQA or are using *Writing for SQA* for the first time, we recommend that you start with:

♦ Writing the name of the organisation
♦ Referring to SQA's qualifications
♦ Plain English

If you have any questions, please email marketing@sqa.org.uk or contact one of SQA's editors.

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This 2020 version of *Writing for SQA* includes:

♦ how we should refer to the COVID-19 coronavirus
♦ new guidance on accessible and inclusive writing
♦ a change to how we write times in science and technical documents, and
♦ additions to the preferred spelling checklist

Screenshots have been updated to show Office 365 screens.

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Contents

[The topics below are hyperlinks]

A or an?

Be guided by pronunciation. Use 'a' before words beginning with 'h', unless the 'h' is silent:

♦ a history, a hope, a Higher pass, a hotel
♦ an hour, 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 HNC, an HND, an SVQ, an SQA-approved centre

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Abbreviations and acronyms (initialisms)

Initialisms can be useful but too many of them in a document can make your writing hard to follow. Be consistent about how you use them and try to avoid introducing new instances.

When giving a name that is normally abbreviated to its initials give it in full the first time you use it, followed by the abbreviated form in parentheses (but not in a heading). For example:

'Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) is responsible for economic regeneration in that region. HIE's role also extends to …'

An acronym is an abbreviation that can be pronounced as a word, for example scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) or NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

Full stops

Full stops mark the ends of sentences. We do not use them in abbreviations or acronyms:

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

See Eg, ie, etc for more on abbreviations.

Be consistent in the way you use abbreviations — for example, does 'IV' mean internal verifier or internal verification?

Avoid overusing abbreviations — they can make text harder to read for someone who is in a hurry or for someone who is not familiar with our shorthand.

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Accessible and inclusive writing

SQA communications, publications and everything else we write (content) should be accessible to everyone and should be written in language that is inclusive.

By 'accessible' we mean being able to physically access our content and being able to understand it. By 'inclusive language' we mean language that does not exclude anyone because of disability, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation. While we should all make every effort to write inclusively, writers and editors should also ensure that this does not affect any technical requirements of our qualifications.

When speaking to an audience, you can often recognise when someone isn't understanding something, and so you can modify or repeat what you are saying. However, if someone reads your text but can't understand it, then your message doesn't get across.

Writing for everyone

Over one in four adults in Scotland experience challenges due to a lack of literacy skills.[1] They can understand short, straightforward texts on familiar topics accurately and independently, and obtain information from everyday sources, but reading information from unfamiliar sources, or on unfamiliar topics, can cause problems.

Here are some things to look out for:

Sentence structure

Keep sentences short and uncomplicated. As far as possible, stick to a limit of one idea or instruction in each sentence. As a general rule, the more complex the information, the simpler the sentence structure should be.

Emphasis

Emphasising important words in **bold** type can help to clarify an instruction. However, this can become distracting if not used with care. It should be used consistently and should only be used when it is clearly helpful.

Consistency

If you need to use the same name, phrase or description more than once, be consistent and use the same phrasing or emphasis each time. Using different words to describe the same thing, or using different emphasis on the same word, may confuse some readers.

And here are some things to avoid:

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[1] Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic guidance

The passive voice

Minimise use of the passive voice. The active form is easier to understand.

Verb and/or adverb forms of the equivalent noun forms

Use verb forms rather than the equivalent (but longer) noun forms. For example: 'protect' is easier than 'protection', 'absorb' is easier than 'absorption' and so on.

Ambiguity

Avoid ambiguity — it can be a problem for someone with reading difficulties. Try asking a colleague to check if your meaning is clear.

Metaphors, idioms and jargon

Avoid metaphors, idiom and jargon wherever possible.

A **metaphor** is a word or phrase that says one thing *is* another thing, but it isn't literally true, for example 'It is raining cats and dogs'. An **idiom** is a word or phrase that has informally developed a specific meaning, for example 'off the cuff' and 'jump the gun'. **Jargon** is a special way to use words that is shared only by a certain group of people. Using jargon is often shorter than explaining ourselves, but it can also prevent others from joining in or understanding, for example: 'this candidate has been resulted'.

Many of the above suggestions share common ground with plain English.

Supporting disabled people

People who are disabled face barriers on an everyday basis. This includes prejudice, negative stereotyping, lack of accessible transport, housing and information — and a lack of understanding of their needs and rights.

Language can reinforce either positive or negative views of disability and can be linked to the two models of disability.

The **medical model** is the traditional view of disability and sees someone's impairment as the problem. For example, 'the candidate is wheel-chair bound and so cannot use the steps to access the centre'.

The **social model** sees disability as barriers that people experience. For example, 'the centre doesn't have a lift or ramp and so isn't suitable for a candidate who is a wheel-chair user'.

The social model also focuses on the language used when discussing disability and the impact that can have on attitudes. For example, 'the candidate is a wheel-chair user' is more positive than the 'candidate is wheel-chair bound'.

SQA favours the social model of disability. So …

Do say	Don't say
disabled candidates*	the disabled **or** candidates with disabilities
people living with deafness	people suffering from deafness
non-disabled	able-bodied
has epilepsy	suffers from epilepsy
people with visual impairments; blind people; blind and partially sighted people	the blind
person with a mental health condition	mental patient

*'Disabled people' is the preferred term rather than 'people with disabilities' because it is based on the idea that disability stems from the barriers they face.

Disability is an area where language is subject to debate and change. There is often concern as to whether words used are appropriate. Since language is constantly evolving the following is only a guide to what is preferred. It is important to remember that people have the right and choice to describe themselves as they wish.

See Introduction to the Social and Medical Models of Disability from www.ombudsman.org.uk for more on this topic.

Ways to help readers who are living with a disability

Offer alternatives

Can you think of any barriers that might restrict your readers from carrying out a task or activity? For example, a task asking an IT candidate to use a mouse to carry out an action causes problems for someone with motor difficulties. Give alternative ways to carry out the task such as using the keyboard.

SQA can produce material in audio, braille and other alternative formats for customers who are unable to access the standard formats (see the assessment arrangements pages of SQA's website). When a braille question paper is requested for the exam diet we publish it on our website afterwards as a past paper.

Be aware that your reader may be using a screen reader

Screen readers were invented to help people with visual loss but they are often used for supportive reading where a learner tries to read the text on-screen at the same time.

JAWs is an example of a screen reader used by those with severe visual impairment, but note that the Scottish Voice offers a text reader with voices in a Scottish accent.

Pictures

Only use images that complement the written text. Try not to rely solely on pictures to explain a particular point — someone using a screen reader could be disadvantaged. You must give any images a visual description as alternative text. In Word, right-click (if using a mouse) on your picture and choose 'Format Picture', then go to the tab called 'Layout & Properties' and enter the description under 'Alt Text'.

You should not exclusively use images as a navigation device, or to convey information. If you use images, you should also provide a text equivalent.

Colour

People with a visual stress issue can find that the use of coloured glasses, overlays or paper can improve reading fluency, comfort, comprehension, attention and concentration. However, someone using colour in this way could run into problems if colour is used in the original document. One solution is to include a numerical key together with colour.

Similarly, people who are colour-blind may need support in accessing a document that includes these red or green colours.

Be aware also that any meaning that colour is used to convey could be inadvertently lost if a document is printed in black and white.

Use Word styles

Use the 'Styles' function to apply heading styles in Microsoft Word. This will make the text accessible to someone using a screen reader.

How to use Word styles

Phrases to avoid

Never use 'click here' if you are supplying text for a web page. In fact, you should avoid using the word 'click' in general, as it assumes the reader is using a mouse to navigate the site. The same goes for phrases like 'use the box on the right' — screen readers and some specially configured browsers do not present content in columns, so the statement would not make sense to the person reading or hearing it.

Instead of 'click here', try to make your link text meaningful. For example:

'You can find more on inclusive language on the UK Government website Gov.UK.'

or

'See Gov.uk for more on inclusive language.'

Guidelines for web accessibility

SQA's website, and all our web services, follow the [W3 Consortium guidelines for web accessibility](), aiming for 'AA' standard.

[W3.org web accessibility quick reference guide]()

[SQA's website accessibility page]()

Supporting people who are from different cultures or whose first language isn't English

Only refer to people's religious or racial heritage if it is relevant to the point you are making. If this is the case, refer to 'family origin'. Be accurate: consider the difference in meaning between 'he is Pakistani' and 'he is British, of Pakistani origin'.

Describing people by their skin colour is only pertinent in a very few situations. The terms BME (black and minority ethnic) or BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) were common in 2020, but be aware that [they are not universally approved of](). Be accurate and be respectful.

It is best to avoid metaphors, idioms and jargon when your audience includes people whose first language isn't English. Not because they lack literacy skills: they simply may not have come across your figure of speech before.

Also, be aware that many different languages are spoken in Scotland. Over 40 different languages are spoken by the pupils at Shawlands Academy.

Lastly, it is important to be aware that many deaf people regard [British Sign Language]() as their first language (around 145,000 people in 2011).

Gender identity and sexual orientation

Aim to use gender-neutral language consistently throughout your writing. Avoid using 'he/she' and 'his/her' to denote uncertainty. Use 'they' and 'them'.

Remember that sexual orientation is different from gender and gender identity:

♦ Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to.
♦ Gender identity is about who you are.
♦ In the Equality Act, sex can mean either male or female, or a group of people like men or boys, or women or girls.
♦ Stonewall uses LGBT. Our Rainbow Network has indicated they prefer LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer or questioning, intersex and others).

The terms 'homosexual', 'bisexual' and 'transsexual' are, according to Stonewall, regarded as outdated. Avoid 'straight' and other euphemisms.

If you aren't sure — ask! Promoting equality is something SQA takes very seriously.

SQA's equality home page

Links

UK government guidelines when writing about disability

Stonewall glossary of terms

Equality and Human Rights Commission advice on sex discrimination

Further reading

Writing Around the World: A Guide To Writing Across Cultures by Matthew McCool

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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 email.'

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 that can cause confusion:

Singular words that 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
- the candidates' evidence is assessed and verified on an ongoing basis

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

- children's books
- sheep's clothing

It's very difficult, especially when you're in a hurry, to get all of your *its* and *it's* right. Use **its** when you mean the possessive and use **it's** when you mean 'it is'.

- Every dog has its day.
- It's a disaster!

No apostrophe

There is no apostrophe in the name of a decade:

- the **2020s** not the **2020's**

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Appendices

An appendix is a useful home for something that 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.

However, appendices have their disadvantages.

First, if your readers need to read the information in an appendix before they can understand what you are saying, they will find themselves continually flicking backwards and forwards between the appendix and the text.

Secondly, if they don't need to have the information that is in the appendix, they may well ignore it altogether.

Before adding an appendix to your document ask yourself 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 that 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 copy and use (though worked examples are, as a rule, better included with the text)

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

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Audience

Deciding who you are writing for is one of the most important aspects of writing.

You might have several audiences in mind but which is the main one? Ideally, once you have decided on your primary audience you should state explicitly what it is and then address that audience directly. This will allow you to prefer the active voice over the passive voice — which almost always makes your text clearer for your reader.

If you have more than one audience and neither has priority, say learners and teachers, then perhaps you should consider separate documents for each audience.

If that is not feasible you may find it helpful to think about three categories of text within a single document:

♦ common text that meets the needs of both audiences
♦ detail for learners — make this clear in headings
♦ detail for teachers — again, make this clear in headings

The size of each category depends on your particular document.

Another approach could be to build explanations into your text so that the needs of both audiences can be met — but you need to be careful that you don't alienate your primary audience with unnecessary detail. You might be able to avoid that last objection by hyperlinking to explanatory text elsewhere, but overuse of this technique can make things too awkward for your less knowledgeable readers.

See the Clear and Confident Writing SQA Academy course for more on audience.

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Brackets

Brackets can be round (), square [], curly {}, or angled <>.

Oxford recommends using round brackets for digressions, explanations, cross-references, and references; and retaining square brackets for when you want to supplement original text. At SQA, we usually only use curly and angled brackets in STEM subjects.

Try to avoid setting brackets within brackets in regular text, but if you need to then it is OK to use round within round (like this (yes, really)).

Punctuation

The rules for punctuation between brackets are the same as for punctuation within quotation marks:

♦ A complete sentence inside brackets within another sentence does not take an initial capital or a full stop.
♦ A complete sentence within brackets that is not part of another sentence takes an initial capital and ends with a full stop within the brackets.

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Bullets

Bullet-point lists are:

♦ easy to read
♦ visually striking
♦ clean and neat

To capitalise or not to capitalise …

Bullet points should not be capitalised when they are incomplete sentences that cannot be read on their own without the stem. In this case, they should not finish with commas or semi-colons. (The statement 'Bullet-point lists are:' is the stem of the list in the example above.)

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.'

How to format a bullet-point list
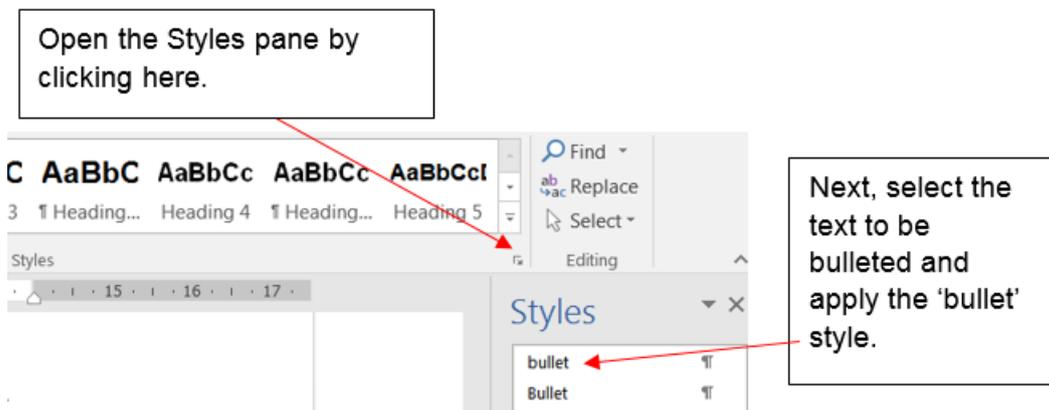
If you are using the SQA Normal template, this will set a diamond bullet as shown in the examples on this page.

If you need to have a sub-list of bullets, use the 'Second order bullet' style in the Styles pane. This will give you a long dash (technically, an em dash) as a bullet.

'Bullet-point lists are:

♦ easy to read

— each point starts on a new line
— there is no unnecessary detail to absorb'

For Mathematics, use a square bullet for second-order bullets to avoid any possible confusion with minus signs.

For Computing, use a circle if a third-order bullet is needed.

Grammatical sense

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'

Bullet points are a useful way of making text stand out on the page, but you also have to be wary of overusing them — too many bullet points can make text harder to read. If you have more than three separate sets of bullets on a page (that is, bullets in more than three paragraphs) it may be time for a rethink.

Oxford Dictionaries on bullet points

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Can or 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 say 'candidates can be assessed by examination' or 'you can contact our Customer Contact Centre on …'

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Capital letters

SQA's rule for when to use capitals, and when not, is:

♦ if it is the title of a specific person or thing, it takes title case

♦ if it's a more general name, it doesn't

Title case means initial capitals on main words only; **sentence case** means an initial cap on the first word; and **lower case** means no capitals at all. Most of the time, we use lower case.

As well as words that take capitals in everyday English (such as the names of people and places), things that always need capitals when we're writing for SQA are:

♦ names of qualifications

♦ unit and course titles

♦ the name of the subject of an SQA qualification

♦ publication titles (but not types of publication)

Capitals are useful as signposts, and to help distinguish between different kinds of thing (for example: the subject History taught in school, the history of the school). Don't use them, though, in an attempt to emphasise what you're saying, or because a word seems important.

See *SQA's Guide to Using Capital Letters* for detailed guidance and examples.

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Clear and Confident Writing course

The [Clear and Confident Writing course on SQA Academy](#) consists of four 30-minute modules:

- Plain English
- Know your Audience
- Tone of Voice
- Editing and Proofreading

These topics are covered in *Writing for SQA* but the interactive SQA Academy course provides more detail along with activities to help ensure our writing is clear and concise for our target audiences.

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Colons and semi-colons

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.

You should not, however, use a colon if you already use 'include/including' to indicate that further information will follow. In the example below both are used, which is incorrect.

'There should be an awareness of the main historical characters: including Kenneth McAlpin, Macbeth and Duncan …'

It should read:

'There should be an awareness of the main historical characters, including Kenneth McAlpin, Macbeth and Duncan …'

Semi-colons

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 is almost always better to use a list of bullets instead.

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

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Commas

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

Lists

In a simple list, commas are used to separate the items, as in:

'Commas, colons and semi-colons are punctuation marks.'

However, if a list is complicated, it can be clearer to add a comma before the 'and' or 'or' at the end of a list. This is referred to as an 'Oxford comma'. For 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 separating 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.

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Contents list

There's no need to manually key in a contents list in a Word document. If your headings have been set up using Word's Styles feature (see Templates) then go to the References tab and choose Table of Contents to create a contents list automatically. You may have to edit the table that is generated to remove unwanted detail but the page numbers will be correct.

If your text changes subsequently, you can update the table of contents by selecting it, right-clicking and choosing Update Field. You will then see the dialogue box below. Choose the option you need.

Update Table of Contents

Word is updating the table of contents. Select one of the following options:

◉ Update page numbers only
◯ Update entire table

OK   Cancel
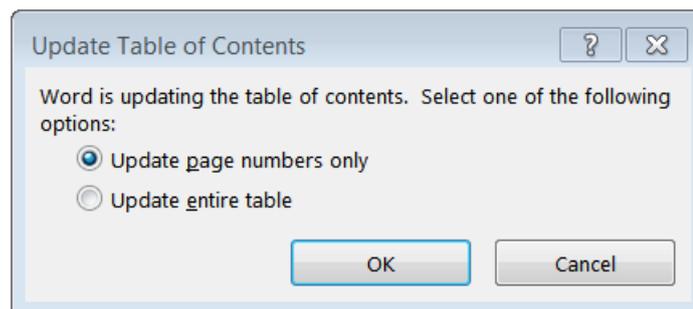
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Copyright

This is a quick reference guide that aims to address the most important aspects of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

If you require more detailed information on the use of copyright and trademarks, please refer to *SQA's Copyright Guidelines*.

What does copyright protect?

Copyright is an intellectual property right which can subsist in literary works, dramatic works, musical works, artistic works, films, sound recordings, broadcasts, and typographical arrangements of published editions.

How long does copyright last?

Copyright in a literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work (including a photograph) generally lasts until 70 years after the death of the author (or from the date of creation/public release for anonymous works). Different periods of copyright can apply to different types of work.

Who is the copyright owner?

The author of a work is the first owner of any copyright in it, except where the work is made by an employee in the course of their employment, in which case the employer is the first owner (subject to any agreement to the contrary).

What is fair dealing?[2]

'Fair dealing' is a legal term used to establish whether a use of copyright material is lawful or whether it infringes copyright. There is no statutory definition of fair dealing — it will always be a matter of fact, degree and impression in each case.

For copying to constitute an infringement of copyright, it must involve the use of a substantial part of the protected work. Whether the part used is substantial is measured qualitatively (not quantitatively). This is a matter of fact which will vary from case to case. In some cases, a newspaper headline or a famous line from a book or song could be regarded as a substantial part.

Factors that have been identified by the courts as relevant in determining whether a particular dealing with a work is fair, include:

♦ Does using the work affect the market for the original work? If a use of a work acts as a substitute for it, causing the owner to lose revenue, then it is not likely to be fair.

♦ Is the amount of the work taken reasonable and appropriate? Was it necessary to use the amount that was taken? Usually only part of a work may be used.

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2 Source: Intellectual Property Office Online (2014) *Exceptions to copyright: Guidance for creators and copyright owners* www.gov.uk/ipo

If you use copyright material and make it available to anyone (for example, by putting it on a public website) then it is not likely to be viewed as fair dealing.

If in doubt — obtain permission

If you use copyright material without permission or acknowledgement you may incur considerable financial penalties for SQA. It could also be hugely damaging to SQA's reputation and any infringement could generate negative publicity.

Setting or answering examination questions

There are a number of exceptions to copyright that allow limited use of a copyright work without the permission of the copyright owner. This includes, in the case of schools and other educational establishments, anything done for the purpose of setting or answering examination questions, provided that the questions are, where possible, accompanied by a sufficient acknowledgement. This does not cover photocopying music that is to be performed in an examination. It also does not apply to other uses of such work, for example if the work is included in past papers available on SQA's website.

Use of trademarks

If you wish to use trademarks for the purposes of examination, you should not need to obtain permission from the trademark owner. Nevertheless, it is good practice to seek permission from the relevant trademark owner to avoid any claims of trademark infringement or any other objections that the trademark owner may have against SQA.

Quotations

In 2014, copyright law changed to give people greater freedom to quote the works of others. You no longer need to seek the permission of the copyright owner as long as the quotation is accompanied by a sufficient acknowledgement — which generally means the title and the author's name should be indicated, and **as long as the use is considered reasonable and fair (fair dealing)**. This was an extension to the existing law that allowed fair dealing with copyright materials for the purpose of criticism, review and news reporting.

Does this mean people can 'quote' any amount of copyright material without permission? No. The change only allows use of material where it is **genuinely for the purpose of quotation**, and only where the use is **fair and reasonable** (for example, it does not replace a commercial sale). So, it could permit a short quotation that is necessary and relevant in an academic paper or a history book, for example, but it would not permit a long extract.

Does the 'quotation exception' apply to photographs?

While the exception applies to all types of copyright work, it would only be in exceptional circumstances that copying a photograph would be allowed under this exception. It would not be considered fair dealing if the proposed use of a copyright work would conflict with the copyright owner's normal exploitation of their work. For example, the ability to sell or license copies of photographs for inclusion in newspapers would be a normal exploitation.

Copyright notices

It is important that you identify material taken from another SQA publication when submitting your work for publication — taking care to attribute any copyright material to the original source.

It may be necessary to obtain permission to use previously cleared copyright material if you are using it in a new publication or if you intend to use the copyright material for a purpose that had not been previously approved by the copyright owner.

Copyright notices are not strictly required by law in the UK but they make clear who owns the copyright. An example of this statement could be:

Copyright © Scottish Qualifications Authority 2020.

Clearance of copyright works for commercial use

If we wish to use someone else's copyright material (third party copyright) for purposes that are not covered by the exemptions mentioned above, then we must obtain clearance from the copyright owner. Copyright identification forms need to be completed by the relevant team within SQA. We need to identify the copyright holder and request permission to use other people's work as early as possible, as sometimes it can take a long time for permission to be granted.

Copyright and the internet

It is a common misconception that simply because material is available on the internet, it is free to use by anyone. This is not the case. Copyright applies equally to material found online as it does in printed books or magazines. Always exercise caution when using material sourced from the internet. Every effort should be made to check the terms and conditions of use on the website and, if necessary, obtain permission and acknowledge the rights holder as set out above.

Copyright owned by the Crown

In some instances, Crown copyright will be available for use (including for commercial use) under an Open Government Licence, provided that the source of the information is acknowledged in a specific form (set out in the licence) and a link is provided back to the licence.

However, in common with other types of copyright, each work may be different and therefore you should check any particular licence terms that may apply to Crown copyright before using it.

Use of social media trademarks

The use of a social media brand or trademark is usually controlled by strict terms and conditions. Always read these first. They are usually available on the company's website.

Twitter allows users to use their original and unmodified Twitter bird to represent their brand. They do not allow any modification of their logo and have detailed

rules regarding how the logo should be displayed and how accounts and hashtags should be promoted.

Similarly, Facebook allows users to use their 'f', 'Like' and 'Find us on Facebook' logos to illustrate their presence on Facebook.

YouTube allows their users to use their logo to link to a YouTube channel.

Typically, the design and colour of logos must not be modified or used in a way that implies partnership, sponsorship or endorsement.

Contacts for copyright queries and advice

Question papers: Michael Gallagher and Janine Anderson, Assessment Development and Delivery

Support materials: Melanie Beck and Maggie Quinn, Assessment Development and Delivery

Corporate: David McCormick, Communications and Engagement

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COVID-19 coronavirus

This sentence shows how we should usually refer to the disease and virus:

'According to the World Health Organisation, COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus.'

Note that:

♦ 'COVID-19' is an acronym — **CO**rona **VI**rus **D**isease 20**19**, so is all caps.
♦ 'coronavirus' isn't a proper noun — it's a type of thing — so doesn't take a cap, just as 'detergent' doesn't but 'Fairy Liquid' does.

In our emergency response docs — for colleges, ETPs, schools, etc — we've exclusively used COVID-19.

However, many people refer to the disease as 'coronavirus', so always think of your audience and refer to it initially as 'COVID-19 coronavirus' if you think it makes your message clearer.

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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 if it helps make the reference clearer, like this:

'You will also find a useful explanation of the various instruments of assessment in *Guide to Assessment*, 'Assessment instruments'.'

However, you should also consider re-phrasing:

'You will also find useful explanations in the assessment instruments section of *Guide to Assessment*.'

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Dashes

Dashes have two similar uses:

♦ You can put an explanatory phrase — like this one — in long dashes (technically called em dashes) in the middle of a sentence. You can't, though, use more than one pair of dashes in a 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.

Two possible keyboard shortcuts for a long dash are:

♦ Alt 0151 using the numeric keypad with 'Num Lock' switched on, or
♦ Alt Ctrl Minus sign (on the numeric keypad)

Two possible keyboard shortcuts for a short dash are:

♦ Alt 0150 using the numeric keypad with 'Num Lock' switched on, or
♦ Ctrl Minus sign (on the numeric keypad)

See Range of years and Numbers for when to use a short dash or en dash.

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Dates and time

Dates should not include an ordinal suffix (in other words no 1**st**, 2**nd**, 3**rd**). Our style for dates is <day number> <month> <year>: 1 June 2020. A way to remember this is to remember that the units of time start small (1) on the left, and end up big (2020) on the right.

Ensure dates appear in one line and are not separated by a line break. For example, writing '1 June 2020' would be fine, whereas writing something like '1 June 2020' isn't as straightforward to read and could disrupt the flow of a reader.

Our 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 from 10 am to 1 pm and from 2–3 pm.'

Note: there is no need to include zeroes if the time is on the hour.

24-hour clock

If you are working on a STEM document and need to adhere to ISO 8601 then use the 24-hour clock with a colon separator. For example:

'The next assessment is at 14:30.'

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, 2019–20, but 1990–2020.

Alternatively, you can use 'from' and 'to' to show the range, as in 'from 2019 to 2020'; but you mustn't mix the two methods as in 'from 2019–2020'.

Two keyboard shortcuts for a short dash are Ctrl Minus sign (on the numeric keypad) or Alt 0150 (with Num Lock switched on).

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, for example *Summer Lightning*, *The Lion in Winter*. In ordinary use, lower case is better, for example 'let's discuss this again in the spring'.

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Diagrams, maps and graphs (line illustrations)

If your document includes graphics that need to be drawn by an artist, please provide a clear drawing of each illustration on a separate sheet of A4. The drawings can be basic but should include all the features that you want to appear in the final illustration.

SQA's graphic artists are professionals, but they may not be specialists in your subject. Please therefore annotate your drawings with descriptions and instructions to help them as much as possible, circling any text that is not meant to appear in the final illustration as a label. Remember to number each drawing and indicate its position in the text.

If you wish to supply a photocopy as an artist's reference, please indicate that it is to be used as a reference only and is not be copied exactly in order to avoid infringing copyright. You should supply a written brief describing what you need to see in the picture and include directions to the artist as to how the SQA illustration and labels should be amended to avoid infringing copyright.

Illustrations can be expensive and time-consuming to prepare. Please try to ensure that any request you contribute to your publication is not simply 'filler art'.

When supplying an image for use on web pages you must also include suitable text for visually impaired users — this should be a short visual description of the image, which will be used to describe how the image appears to screen readers and other assistive software.

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eg, ie, NB, etc

The Government's digital service (GOV.UK) has started to [remove Latin abbreviations such as 'eg', 'ie', NB and 'etc' from its web pages](#) because they make reading difficult for some readers and can confuse screen readers.

We are also now following this approach and in main text suggest replacing 'eg' with 'for example', 'ie' with 'that is', and 'NB' with 'Note:'. However, for tables where space is limited we'd suggest the continued use of 'eg' and '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 appear in brackets. You shouldn't give them full points — ie don't use 'i.e.'.

If you need to use 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. 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

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

Elision or contractions are perfectly appropriate in most circumstances: in newsletters, anything labelled as 'guidance', and communications addressed to teachers, lecturers, people in the workplace, or candidates. It's perhaps less appropriate in procedural documents, or course and unit specifications — 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.

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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.

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Email

It's easy to reach for the keyboard to bash out an email, but there are times when this can cause an adverse reaction. A phone call can often be a more effective way to sort out a problem. Perhaps the other person would simply feel better (about SQA) if you took the trouble to speak to them in person?

If an email is the right way for us to be communicating (and it often is), try to keep in mind the following four points and you will produce a professional communication that is readily understood and that supports SQA's business goals.

♦ Address your reader directly as if you were talking to them.
♦ Write clearly.
♦ Be positive and confident.
♦ Look and sound professional.

Talk to your reader

There's sometimes a tendency for the tone of business writing to be pitched in remote and formal language, but there is really no need for this to be so. Use natural, everyday language and avoid being overly formal. **If it's something you wouldn't consider saying in speech to your reader, then don't write it down.**

This includes the salutation:

♦ If there is a need to be formal (for example, if you are writing to a customer or a member of the public) and you know the name of the person you are writing to then you should say 'Dear Mr/Ms/Mrs/Mx/Miss/Dr <surname>'. If you know what they use, use that.
♦ If you know the person and have an established working relationship with them you might say 'Hi <First name>' or just 'Hello'.
♦ But what if you are writing to individual and you don't know their name, or you are writing an email that will be sent to a large audience? You then have a choice of 'Dear colleague' or perhaps 'Hello'. Try to avoid 'Dear Sir/Madam'.

Many of our emails are written to people in SQA centres who are doing the organising and administration running our qualifications demands. Once you've made this plain in the subject line of your email, there is no reason why you shouldn't then address them as 'you' throughout the text, rather than referring to 'centres'.

Don't say …

'Centres should retain candidates' work for verification.'

Do say …

'You should retain candidates' work for verification'.

Keeping it clear

If there is one basic principle for writing clearly, it is this: keep it short and simple. This applies to words, sentences and paragraphs.

Say what you want to say in as few words as you can and don't be vague. For example, say 'We advise ...', not 'We would advise …'.

Prefer active verbs over passive verbs. For example, in 'Lesley drafted the email.' the verb 'drafted' is active, while in 'The email was drafted by Lesley.' it is passive.

More about active and passive

Do say …	Don't say …
'We have decided that …' 'We recommend …'	'It has been decided that …' 'It is recommended ...'

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

Be positive

Focus on what we will do, rather than what we can't or won't. Also, don't be afraid to apologise if we have made a mistake — but say what we're doing to put it right.

Do say …	Don't say …
'We will provide the information you requested by 28 February.'	'We cannot provide the information you requested until next month.'

Use co-operative vocabulary like 'help' and 'work with' to show that we work as a team.

Look professional

Although they're less formal than many other forms of writing, it's still important that emails from SQA are as professional as possible. This means checking for easily avoidable errors — factual errors, of course, but also spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. Turn on the spellchecker (and leave it on). Then check your message over. If possible, get someone else to read it before it goes out, or leave a few minutes between writing and sending.

You should also probably avoid jokes, unless you know the recipient very well.

There are other aspects to being professional. For instance, you can make messages look as neat and business-like as possible by avoiding background colours and setting up a signature that will appear at the foot of every email that you send. In Outlook, go to Message > Signature.

If you're thinking of communicating with a group of stakeholders or customers it may be appropriate to make use of SQA's e-fulfilment system, which is used for our Centre News updates. Please contact communications@sqa.org.uk to discuss your requirements.

Signing-off

If you were writing a letter and you had opened it with 'Dear colleague' the traditional sign-off would be 'Yours faithfully' but is there any need to use such an archaic term in an email? Well, as always, it depends on who you are writing to, but in most business emails you can probably drop it altogether. However, don't just finish your message without some form of sign-off. Try to say something that reflects the content of your email, but if that is not feasible, you could try …

'Thank you' or 'Regards' or 'Hope you find this helpful'

You should always sign-off emails with your name. This is important even if you are responding from a team mailbox because it lets your customer or colleague know who has actually attended to their query and who they should contact if they need to phone. They may also want to thank you personally.

PS — you can use a 'post script' if you want to draw attention to something that you've already mentioned or to provide further information.

Further reading

The Essential Guide to Crafting a Work Email (Harvard Business Review)

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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,** not *italic* or <u>underline</u> — AND DON'T USE CAPITALS because it means you are shouting at your reader. 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 *italic* for the titles of publications.

Don't use italic if you are writing web page text — italic text is harder to read on screen.

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Footnotes

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

If you have to use a footnote, go to the References tab in Word and select Insert Footnote.
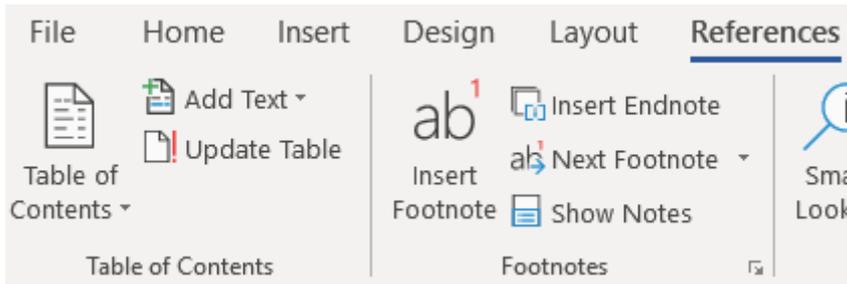
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Foreign words

Try to avoid using words from other languages that haven't been fully naturalised into English, because they make it hard for people who don't know the language in question to understand.

If you must use, say, a Latin word, assume that it has been fully adopted into English, and treat it as an English word, if possible. The only exceptions to this general rule are some scientific and mathematical terminology; and Latin words ending in '-a', which tend to take '-ae' plurals.

Specific foreign words and their plurals

The plural of 'forum' is 'forums' (unless you're writing about ancient Roman town planning features).

The plural of 'consortium' is 'consortiums'. (People do use 'consortia', but often incorrectly, giving rise to 'consortia-developed Higher National Qualifications', which is logically impossible.)

'Syllabus' causes enormous confusion. There's no evidence for 'syllabus' actually being a Latin word (it doesn't look like a Latin word), or a Greek word, so we can't begin to tell what its classical plural might have been. In English, it's always 'syllabuses' in the plural.

It's perfectly acceptable in modern English to use 'data' as a singular ('the data shows us that uptake is increasing …'). It's very strange to see its Latin singular (datum) used outwith scientific journals, and unusual to see 'data' being used as a plural — except in computing texts.

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Google Images

Many writers find Google Images to be a useful source of photographs. However, even if an image is identified as free for educational use, it does not mean that it can be published without permission.

All images are protected by copyright although some may have a Creative Commons licence that does not require you to seek permission to use them. Where images on Google Images do not have a Creative Commons licence, it usually proves impossible to obtain permission to use them, because either the copyright owners are hard to trace or they don't reply to emails.

Rather than using Google Images, we recommend using a stock photography site that SQA has an arrangement with, for example Shutterstock.

Note: there are different accounts in use across the organisation. Speak to Procurement to find out if your business area already has an account.

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Grammar myths

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 mustn'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'

There's more about this topic at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/usage/i-or-me.

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 can sound a bit pompous — and its use is declining rapidly.

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Hyphens

There is no consistent rule on when to hyphen and when not, but a general principle is that two words should be hyphened 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, '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).

Always hyphen these terms:

♦ centre-devised
♦ cross-marking
♦ 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 — for example, 'people-oriented approach' or 'work-based learning'.

The prefix 're-' usually takes a hyphen before a vowel: re-assess, re-establish, re-evaluate, re-examine, re-open, re-order, re-organise, re-use (all hyphened).

If you're using 'e' for 'electronic', remember to give it a hyphen. The exception is 'email' which is now almost always used in preference to 'e-mail'. However, other 'e-' terms can be confusing if you don't use the hyphen — for example, if we are writing about 'eenabling eassessment in egovernment and ebusinesses'.

Treat 'e-' words as you would any other — capitalise the 'e' at the beginning of a sentence (for example, say 'Email is a great way to communicate.' not 'eMail is a great way to communicate.').

'Pre-' takes a hyphen before a vowel: pre-arrange, pre-existing, pre-ordained.

'Co-' takes a hyphen before an 'o': co-operate, co-ordinate (unless you're talking about coopers or chicken coops).

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-ise or ize?

Words that have the -ise ending (to rhyme with 'eyes') are spelled with an 's' (recognise, customise, advertise, homogenise), not with a 'z'. Make sure you have spelling set to English (UK), rather than English (US), so that Word doesn't try to correct any -ise endings.

'Analyse' also takes an 's', not a 'z'.

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Its or it's?

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.

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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 …	Do write …
the recording of evidence the entering of candidates the implementation of SQA qualifications the use of	recording evidence entering candidates implementing SQA qualifications using

Plain English Campaign's 'A to Z of alternative words'

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Mathematics

Use MathType to set equations in Microsoft Word.

If you don't have access to MathType, please don't try to emulate complicated layouts in Word using the tab key and the space bar. Use brackets to indicate the structure of equations and formulae, and don't indent anything.

For example: x = [-b ± √(b2 − 4ac)]/2a   <Display>

We will then set this as:

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

Alternatively, just handwrite the equations.

If you intend to set at least some of the mathematical content of your text, then please format your text as follows:

Use italic for variables and algebraic constants, for example $ax^2 + bx + c = 0$. This also holds for superscripts and subscripts, for example $a_n = 1$ for n = 1, 3, 5…

Use roman for labels and for: $\sin$, $\cos$, $\tan$, $\lim$, $\det$, $\log$, $\ln$, e, i, Re, Im

Use bold, non-italic Times New Roman for vectors, for example $\mathbf{a} \times \mathbf{b} = \mathbf{c}$

Please leave a single space either side of an operator such as + or ×.

Units are set in lower case, even if they are based on someone's name, for example watt, kelvin, volt and their abbreviations are capitalised: 100 W, 273 K, 240 V. But note the temperature unit 'degree Celsius' (°C) contains a capital letter — see BSI (2013) *Quantities and units*, BS EN ISO 80000-1:2013 (page 26).

Please either use Insert > Symbol for multiplication signs and degree symbols or use the keyboard shortcuts below. Don't use the letter 'x' or superscript 'o'.

Keyboard shortcuts

First make sure that Num Lock on your numerical key pad is switched on. Then holding down the Alt key, type the four-digit codes on the numerical key pad.

Raised decimal point	·	Alt 0183
multiplication sign	×	Alt 0215
division sign	÷	Alt 0247
minus sign (en dash)	–	Alt 0150
degree symbol	°	Alt 0176

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Money, weights and measures

Money

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 like this: £7.

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

Weights and measures

Insert a space between the number and the unit of measurement, for example:

♦ 25 mm
♦ 89 g

Percentages

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

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Nouns

Collective nouns

Words such as Government, Scottish Enterprise or HM Inspectorate sometimes look as if they're plural, but we treat 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 break up the string of nouns. 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'.

Nouns as verbs

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'.

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Numbered lists

Use the following format. It is similar to that used for question papers but with smaller spacing:

1   Use arabic numbering with no point and a tab of 0.63 mm.

    (a) Use letters with opening and closing brackets for sublists. Indent, tabs and hanging indent are 0.63 mm.

        (i) Sub-sublists use lower case roman numbers with opening and closing brackets. Indent is 1.27. Tabs and hanging indent are 0.63 mm.

Please avoid using the auto-numbering function in Word — insert your numbers manually. This is especially important for headings, and even more important if you are including any cross-references. The reason for this is that auto-numbering falls off as soon as we change the paragraph style or paragraph attributes (as we often do while editing), and doesn't import into typesetting applications (such as InDesign).

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Numbers

The rules for giving numbers in non-science subjects 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 (see below).
♦ The numbers 10 and above should be given as figures. If numbers less than 10 and more than 10 appear together in the one sentence, make them all figures.
♦ Use figures in tables and equations.
♦ For numerical data, always give exact amounts in figures — this applies to money, quantities, and time, as well as to the credit value of a qualification, or its level.
♦ For STEM subjects, set four-digit numbers close up without a comma (like this: 1500). And set numbers with five digits or more with a thin space (6 pt) in place of a comma separator (for example: 50 000). One way to set a thin space is to key the number 2009 where you want the space to appear, then select the 2009 and key Alt + X. You might want to then copy the space and paste it into other instances.
♦ Use the comma separator for all other subjects and non-science contexts (for example: 1,500 or 15,000 or 150,000).
♦ At the beginning of a sentence, always either write the number out in full, even if it is greater than 10, or recast the sentence. Recasting the sentence is the better option for numbers that are greater than 100. Marks are an exception: they are always written using figures — even if they appear at the start of a sentence.

Do say …	Don't say …
'Results have shown improvement this year. Thirty-one candidates achieved grade C.'	'Results have shown improvement this year. 31 candidates achieved grade C.'
'The number of candidates achieving grade C was 31,607'.	'Thirty-one thousand six hundred and seven candidates achieved grade C'.

Note that compound numbers written out in text (thirty-one, sixty-seven, and so on) should be hyphened.

To show a range of values, use a short dash with no space between the figures (for example 3–15 curriculum, 100–150 candidates). The keyboard shortcut for a short dash is Alt 0150. (You need to have Num Lock on.) Note that a short dash is slightly longer than a hyphen, which has its own key.

Decimal points are on the line, not raised.

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Obliques

The oblique symbol (also known as a solidus, stroke or forward slash) is often used to denote alternatives, for example:

'Tea/coffee will be available at 3.00 pm.'

But does the oblique mean 'and' or 'or', or both?

Traditionally, it has meant 'or', but it is best to make your meaning clear by using 'or', 'and' or 'and/or'.

Dates

Obliques are sometimes used in dates (for example: 2019/20) but SQA house style is to use en dashes (as in 2019–20). See Dashes for more on this topic.

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Phone numbers

Put a space between the area code (for example 0141 or 0131) and the next three digits, then another after those, for example 0141 278 1000 or 0131 561 1000.

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

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Photographs

If you are providing photographs for a document, please supply JPEG files at the highest resolution your camera can work at.

Stock photography websites can be a good source of high-quality images. They are particularly good for images of everyday items and situations. If you need this kind of image for your publication, try browsing Shutterstock. You can collect anything suitable into a 'lightbox' for later reference or select and drag low-resolution copies into a Word file. You need to register to use the lightbox facility.

Note: there are different accounts in use across the organisation. Speak to Procurement to find out if your business area already has an account.

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Plain English

Plain English is about writing clearly and concisely with your reader in mind. It allows you to say what you mean, in a way people will understand.

Using plain English is also part of promoting equality, because by writing in a simple and straightforward way, we're not (deliberately) excluding anyone. It allows us to fulfil our duties to abide by equalities legislation.

Plain English is an ideal way to demonstrate the 'enabling' and 'trusted' parts of our corporate values.

Use short sentences

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

If you find that you are writing many sentences which contain more than 30 words, it is likely that your readers are going to find them confusing.

Addressing readers

As you write, think about your reader and how you can make the document useful for them. Make it clear who you are writing to in the subject line or introduction then address your target reader as 'you' throughout the text.

Do say…	Don't say…
'You should keep candidates' work for verification.'	'Centres should keep candidates' work for verification.'

If it's something you wouldn't consider saying in speech, then don't write it down.

Prefer active to passive

Try to mostly use an **active construction**, that is, one where **A** does **B***:*

'The teacher (A) spoke to the class (B).'

A passive construction is one in which **B** is done by **A**:

'The class (B) was spoken to by the teacher (A).'

There are, of course, some things that are better expressed as passives. You can use the passive voice to avoid placing blame or to soften a statement. For example:

'…the invoice for this event has not been paid' may produce a more positive reply than '…you didn't pay our invoice'.

But passives do depersonalise 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).

Do say…	Don't say…
'We decided …'	'It has been decided …'
'We recommend …'	'It is recommended …'

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

More on active and passive

Find out more about how to write in plain English from the Plain English Campaign and from the Plain English module of the SQA Academy Clear and Confident Writing course.

See our equalities web page.

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Planning and structure

The first thing to think about is 'Who is going to read my document?' As you go through the planning, writing and editing process, think about your **target reader** and how you can make the document useful for them.

Secondly, consider the **purpose** of your document — why your reader will use it. It could be to report, to inform, to explain, to ask, or to persuade.

Thirdly, what do you want your reader to do with the information you are giving them? In other words, what will be the **impact** of the document? For example, it may be to adopt a product, to implement or explain a new policy, to plan the content of lessons, or to carry out assessment according to revised procedures.

Planning

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. It might help to number your points to check that they follow one another in a logical order.

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 for learners, the *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.

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.

Similarly, 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 — for example 'see page xx', or 'see section 13, 'Building a portfolio''.

Subsections

Sections of a document can 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.

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.

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 confused. This will save editing time, and help you keep down the number of words you use.

If you need advice on planning and structuring a particular document, contact SQA's editors at marketing@sqa.org.uk.

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Plural(s) or singular(s)

Try to avoid using '(s)' when you're talking about something that could be either singular or plural. It can be a useful shorthand in a simple list of bullet points, but most of what we write is made up of sentences, with verbs and so on. One problem with using (s) is that the verb or verbs you're using won't agree with the subject of the sentence. For instance, the sentence:

'Check that your label(s) are attached as shown in the diagram.'

can be read as '*Check that your label are attached* …', which is a grammatical error of the kind that makes us look silly and causes complaints. To make this correct, you'd need to write:

'Check that your label(s) is (are) attached as shown in the diagram.'

Worse, it can make the sentence unnecessarily hard to understand — and that's especially true when there are lots of instances of '(s)':

'Check that your candidate(s) has (have) submitted his or her (their) script(s) and not his or her (their) rough working sheet(s).'

It's best to choose either singular or plural and stick to it — in the vast majority of cases the meaning will be clear. If you really need to specify that there can be one or more of the thing you're talking about, try recasting your sentence so that you can use an expression like 'one or more'. Most of the time, though, this isn't necessary.

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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.

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Quoting from other documents

When you're referring to an SQA publication for the first time in a document, give its title and hyperlink the title to the web page that it appears on. Never lift chunks out of the other publication and repeat them in your document — use a reference, for example '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.

See also Referencing.

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Referencing

You should provide a list of references to books, journals, and websites mentioned in your text to help your readers identify and locate them. You can do this in footnotes, or a bibliography — try to keep your text as uncluttered as possible.

Harvard referencing

SQA uses the Harvard (author, date) system.

In the main text

Give the author's surname, the year of publication, and possibly a page reference in the text, and then list the full reference at the end of your document. For example, a citation in the text might look like:

'Disciplinary procedures should be in writing' (Hannagan, 2012, p302).

or

'Hannagan (2012) says that disciplinary procedures should be in writing.'

In the bibliography

For a book, the reference in a bibliography would then appear as:

<author's surname>, <initials> (year of publication) <title>, <edition (if not the first)>, <place of publication: publisher>, <page number (if relevant)>

For example:

'Hannagan, T. (2012) *Management Concepts and Practices*, 3rd ed, Harlow: Prentice Hall, p39'

A journal article should appear as:

<surname>, <initials> (year of publication) <title of article>, <journal title>, <volume> (issue), <page numbers>

For example:

'Evans, W.A. (1994) 'Approaches to intelligent information retrieval', *Information Processing and Management*, 7 (2), 147–168'

An internet reference should appear as:

<*author's/editor's surname>, <initials> (year) <article title>, <place of publication: publisher>. Available from: <URL>

*Note that the author may be an organisation, and place/publisher may not always be ascertainable — provide as much detail as possible. It is also best practice to add [date last accessed] but we will not use this in final publications.

Links to websites can be short-lived, so check that any web links are current at the time of writing. Make sure that you convert any web addresses in your document to working hyperlinks.

For example:

'Academic Services, (2007) BU guide to citation in the Harvard style: brief guide, Poole: Bournemouth University. Available from: https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/discover/library/using-library/how-guides/how-cite-references [accessed 06 March 2019]'

or

SQA, (2019) *Your Exams 2019* (BD7899*)*, Glasgow: Scottish Qualifications Authority. Available from: https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/SQA_Your_Exams_2019.pdf [accessed 06 March 2019]

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Referring to SQA's qualifications

When you're talking about SQA's 'product', use 'qualifications'. Don't use 'award', as this is used to refer to the grade a candidate achieves, for example A or B or pass. Only use 'award' when referring to the specific qualifications called awards (such as the Safe Road User Award). Use 'group award' when referring to SVQs, HNCs, etc.

SQA has three families of qualifications: National Qualifications, Higher National Qualifications, and Scottish Vocational Qualifications. Always use 'family' to describe these (not 'block', for instance).

Mentions of SQA Advanced Qualifications, SQA Advanced Diploma, SQA Advanced Certificate must always include the 'SQA' at the beginning. This is a legal requirement, to protect our intellectual property.

If you are giving a qualification a number as well as a name, give the number first, then the title and use initial capitals (title case), as in this example:

(DR30 35) Audio Electronics 2

Capitals in the name of a qualification

Use initial capitals for the names of qualifications, but don't capitalise words like 'and' or 'for'.

♦ National Qualifications
♦ National Progression Awards
♦ National Certificates
♦ National 4 and National 5
♦ Higher
♦ Advanced Higher
♦ Higher National Diploma
♦ Higher National Certificate
♦ Higher National Qualifications
♦ Scottish Vocational Qualifications
♦ Skills for Work
♦ SQA Advanced Qualifications
♦ SQA Advanced Certificate
♦ SQA Advanced Diploma
♦ National Courses
♦ National Units
♦ Higher National Unit
♦ Higher National Group Award

Also, capitalise 'Unit' and 'Graded Unit' if they appear in the unit name as indicated on APS, for example 'Audio Visual Technology: Graded Unit 1'.

Level of a qualification

When you're talking about the level of a qualification — whether it's the SQA level or its level in the SCQF — the word 'level' doesn't need a capital (unless it's at the beginning of a sentence, of course).

We now describe all our qualifications by giving their SCQF level.

Since September 2016, names of SVQs (if they have an SCQF level) have followed the following convention:

SVQ <name> at SCQF level <x>

For example:

SVQ Activity Leadership at SCQF level 5

Grades

We use 'grade' with a lower case 'g' to mean the level of award made to a candidate.

Where qualifications have numeric levels, or can be awarded at numeric grades, always give these in Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3,…), not roman (I, II, III,…).

Grades at Higher and Advanced Higher are given letters. These are always written as capitals, for example A, B, C.

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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 that are expressed in similar language, try to vary them. If bullet points start with the same word or phrase, move this back into the stem (behind the colon introducing the list).

Do say…	Don't say…
'In addition, many people have found that the new qualifications are: ♦ great ♦ brilliant ♦ flexible ♦ very good indeed'	'In addition, many people have found that: ♦ the new qualifications are great ♦ the new qualifications are brilliant ♦ the new qualifications are flexible ♦ the new qualifications are very good indeed'

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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.

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Spelling checklist

This is an alphabetical list of words we use a lot, and some special features they have — it may be that they're often misspelled, or that they can be confused with something very similar.

See *SQA's Guide to Using Capital Letters* on SharePoint for rules about when we should and should not use an initial capital.

Write the word like this …	… and note that it's
adviser	not advisor (though some SVQ standards-setting bodies use the -or spelling)
back up or backup	two words for use as a verb; one word for a noun or adjective
benefit	benefiting, benefited (don't double the 't')
cafe	not café (in British English)
centre-devised	always hyphened
closed-book	hyphened when you're talking about a kind of assessment (another kind is open-book)
competence	not 'competency'; competences in the plural (not competencies)
conducive	not condusive
consensus	not concensus
consortium-developed	always hyphened, and never 'consortia-developed'
convener	(ends in '-er') for someone chairing an SQA meeting, but some local authorities use 'convenor' for council leader
co-ordinator	always hyphened
criteria	the plural of 'criterion'
cross-marking	always hyphened
Curriculum for Excellence	without an 'a' or 'the' prefix, and should be written out in full in formal documents (not 'CfE')
despatch	not dispatch

e-assessment	'E-assessment' at the start of a sentence
e-business	'E-business' at the start of a sentence
e-commerce	'E-commerce' at the start of a sentence
flyer	not flier
email	no longer 'e-mail' — use 'Email' at the start of a sentence
end-user	hyphened
enrol	enrolling, enrolled, enrolment (but use 'entry' for candidates)
feedback	not feed back, except where you're using 'feed back' as a verb
focus	focusing, focused (don't double the 's')
forum	forums in the plural, except when talking about Roman architectural features, when you can use fora
Gàidhlig	Gaelic for Gaelic — use Alt 0224 on your keyboard's number pad to get the à (Num Lock must be on)
helpdesk	all one word
internally-assessed	hyphened when it comes before 'units', for example 'internally-assessed units'; not hyphened when it comes after a verb, for example 'these units are internally assessed'
licence	with a 'c' for the noun, for example 'driving licence', but with an 's' for the verb, for example 'licensing laws'
logbook	not log book
log in, login	'log in' is a verb (log in to the system) and isn't hyphened; 'login' is a noun 'don't share your login'
nationally-recognised	always hyphened
ongoing	not hyphened

|	
online	one word, no hyphen — 'offline' should be written the same way
per cent	not 'percent'
phone	not necessary to write 'phone
practice	with a 'c' for the noun, for example 'piano practice', but with an 's' for the verb, for example 'practising the piano'
pro forma	two words, no hyphen — or can you just use 'form' instead?
re-assessment	lower case
re-sit	not resit
SQA co-ordinator	lower case, except when the title of a particular individual
standards-setting body	all lower case, and hyphened
subject-specific	always hyphened
target	targeting, targeted (don't double the 't')
timescale	one word, no hyphen
up to date	without hyphens except when preceding a noun, for example 'the qualification is up to date', but 'the up-to-date qualification'
web page	two words
website	one word, no hyphen
wifi	but Wi-Fi in technical contexts
word-process	always hyphened
work-based	always hyphened
www.sqa.org.uk	our URL (website address) — always hyperlink; if it's at the end of a sentence, put the full stop in

Templates

SQA's standard Word template is called 'SQA Normal'. We recommend that you use it for most types of document other than letters. You can find it on the network at:
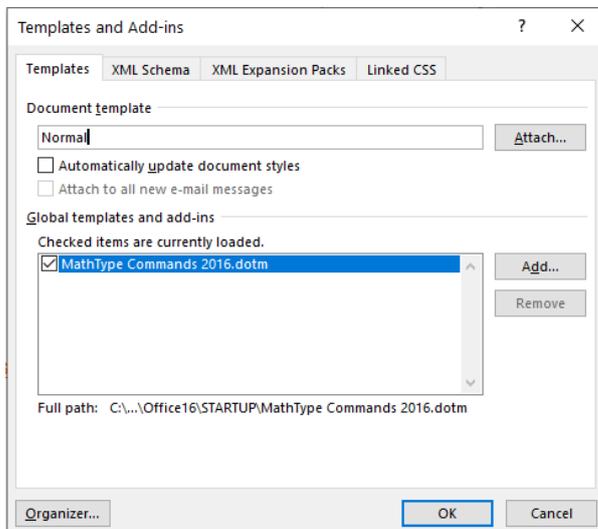
\\sqa3-hanover\Templates

The folders contain standard templates for particular teams. The folder called 'General' has various letter templates.
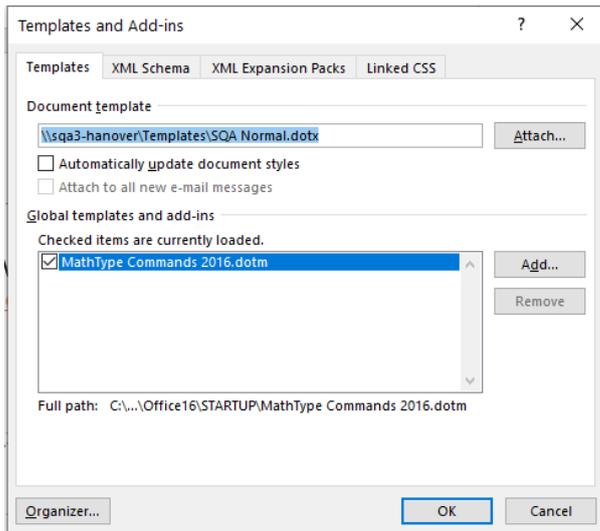
The SQA Normal template is at the foot of the window.

To attach a Word document to SQA Normal, go to the Developer tab then Document Template.
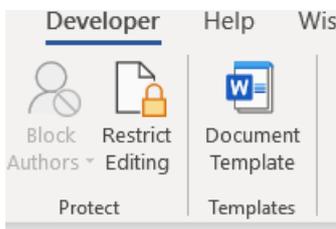
You should see this dialog box:

Select Attach then browse to \\sqa3-hanover\Templates. Select SQA Normal and then Open.

Select 'Automatically update document styles' then OK. Save your document. It is now attached to SQA Normal and any text or heading styles that were set up in the original document should have changed to those used by SQA Normal (see SQA Normal styles below).

Important!

Before doing anything else, you should retrace the path to the last dialog box and **untick** the option to 'Automatically update document styles'. If you don't do this and you pass the document to someone else, then the document may update styles again to the default template on your colleague's machine.

SQA Normal styles

In the ribbon, select the small downward-pointing arrow at the bottom right-hand corner of Styles.
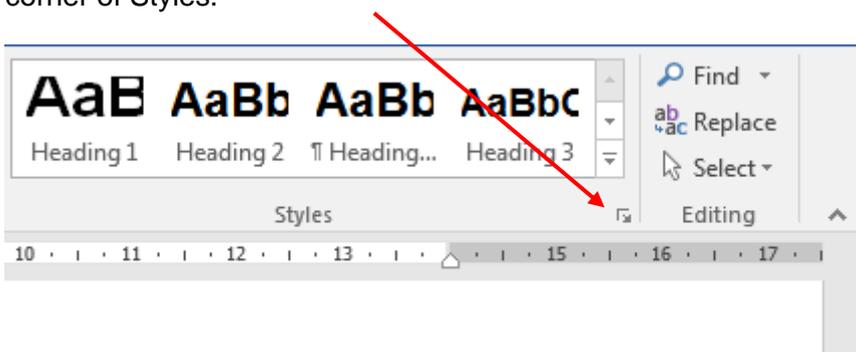

This opens the Styles pane, which includes all our standard heading styles.
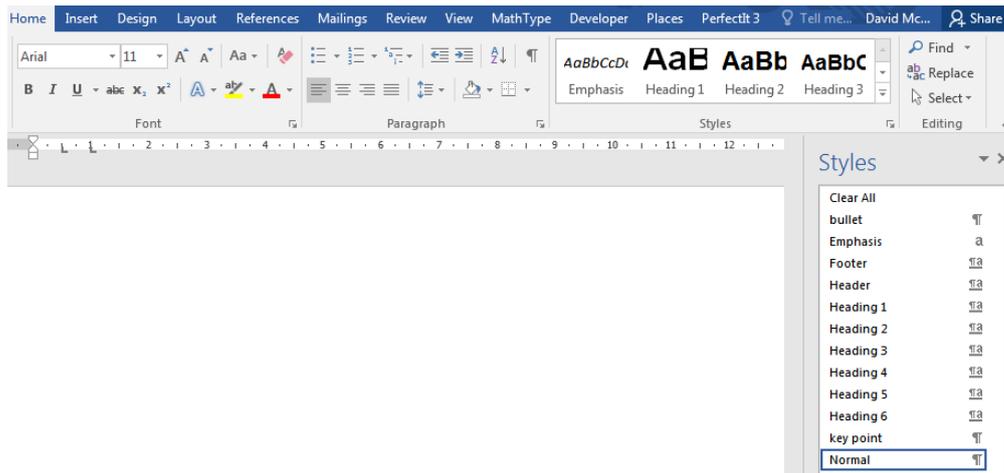
To apply a heading style, key in your heading text then select the text. Next, go to the Styles pane and click on the heading you need:

- ♦ Heading 1 is 24 pt Arial bold
- ♦ Heading 2 is 18 pt Arial bold
- ♦ Heading 3 is 14 pt Arial bold
- ♦ Heading 4 is 12 pt Arial bold
- ♦ Heading 5 is 11 pt Arial bold

If you need a bulleted list, select the list then click on 'bullet' in the Styles pane.

Heading 1 is 24 pt Arial bold
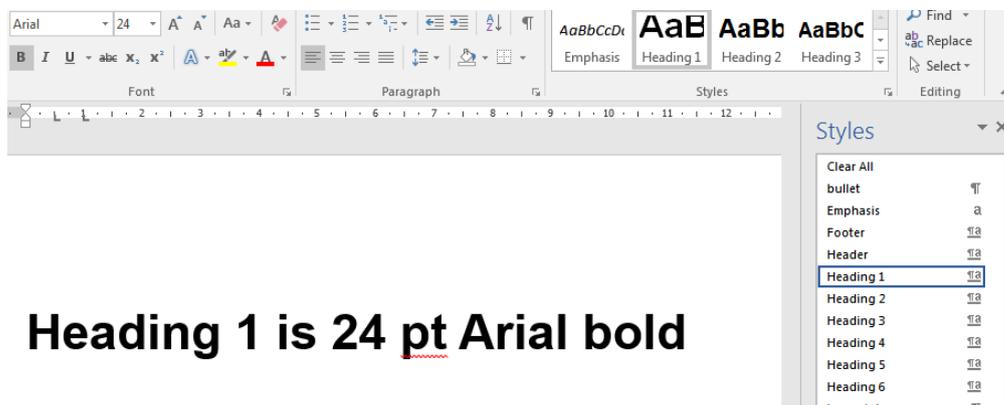
Using heading styles in this way makes your document more accessible — screen readers can identify the various heading levels so blind users can understand the structure of your document.

Heading styles applied in this way also enable you to automatically create a contents page. Go to the **References** menu and look under the **Table of Contents** tab.

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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' or 'whom'.

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Titles of people involved with qualifications

Positions or roles of SQA employees and appointees are set in title case when referring to individuals. But use lower case when referring to positions or roles in general. Here are some examples:

'Sam Smith, Qualifications Manager, was recently appointed to the …'

but

'SQA qualifications officers are responsible to a qualifications manager.'

Or

'Fiona Robertson, SQA's Chief Executive, recently attended ...'

but

'The Scottish Government invited the chief executive to attend …'

'Overall, external verifiers found that the centres sampled had a clear understanding of the requirements for …'

'A nominee represents their school/college and local authority (where appropriate) in assisting SQA with the maintenance of national standards of the qualifications within their subject area.'

Referring to the people who take our qualifications

The people who are taking our qualifications are 'candidates', but only when they're taking the qualifications, for example in the exam hall, or being assessed in their workplaces. You'll use the word 'candidate' most often when you're talking about assessment or certification.

At all other times, you can refer to these people as 'learners' if they are at school or college and 'trainees' if they're doing workplace training. 'Students' is a suitable alternative for learners at college. It's also fine to talk about more specific roles (for example apprentices, trainee hairdressers, fitters) if your document is very specific.

The process of entering candidates for qualifications

Candidates are 'registered' only once and are subsequently 'entered' for 'qualifications'. Usually, they will go on to receive an 'award' in a qualification. SQA 'charges' centres for entries. We pay 'fees' to appointees.

The places (schools, colleges, workplaces, etc) where candidates do the qualifications are called 'centres'. We no longer use the term 'presenting centres'.

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Tone

Tone is about how we 'sound' to our readers. It is important because if a reader finds your tone to be too arrogant, condescending or pedantic then they might not value or act on what you are saying.

You might think that you have expressed your ideas well, but try to remember that you are not writing for yourself. Try to invoke the idea of 'walking in the shoes of your audience' — it can be a very helpful approach to find the right way to say something.

We want all our audiences to think of SQA writing as **clear**, **confident** and **approachable** — and, depending on what they are reading, possibly also **inspiring**.

Be clear

We want our readers to grasp what we are saying quickly and easily. You can do this by using:

♦ short words
♦ short sentences
♦ short paragraphs
♦ the active voice

Do say this …	Don't say this …
'Ask learners to explain their solution in their own words.'	'The learner should be required to give meaning to the determined solution in everyday language.'
'Candidates do not always complete the task.'	'Issues of candidate task completion are being experienced.'

As a guideline: if it's something you wouldn't consider saying in speech, then don't write it down.

Be confident

Writing that is formal and detached and that favours the passive voice can sometimes be seen as over-cautious or lacking confidence.

SQA wants you to state your position with certainty and assurance. Avoid unnecessary words and use practical, straightforward language to convey ideas. Readers are less likely to be confused.

- Get straight to the point.
- Be direct.
- Say what you mean without too many conditions.
- Use words your readers would use.
- Use technical language in context but avoid jargon, abbreviations and acronyms.
- Check facts.
- Proofread for typos.

Do say this…	Don't say this…
'Remember that you can only provide technical assistance to your candidates. You are not allowed to help with the content.'	'It was again apparent, in some instances, that centres were either not aware of the guidance or may have misinterpreted it. Teachers are further reminded that the function of their role in dealing with the externally assessed assignment is purely one of administration and supervision.'
'You **must** acknowledge all material from sources like books, TV and the internet. Your teacher or lecturer can tell you how it's done.'	'It is essential for all candidates to ensure that they are meticulous in referencing their sources. Information on the appropriate method to use to show references can be obtained from teaching staff.'

Be approachable

Your writing needs to convey meaning to everyone who needs to act on it so that they then respond in the way that you intended. So avoid words or phrases that might confuse or even antagonise your audience and choose words and phrases that show you are one person communicating with another. Some SQA writing reads as if we are lecturing a group, but even if you are broadcasting a message to a wide audience it can help to write as if you are 'talking' to an individual.

You can even use this approach for procedural documents which are written for people in centres who are doing the organising and administration that 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 lecturers. If you're writing for teachers and lecturers, say so and then address them personally — call them 'you', not 'teachers/lecturers'. They may pay more attention to what you have to say, and will find it easier to understand.

- ◆ Think about who will read your writing.
  - — Why are they reading it?
  - — What task are they trying to complete?
  - — What information will help them?
  - — What order should it go in?
- ◆ Follow accessibility guidance.
- ◆ Be inclusive.
- ◆ Use 'you' and 'we'.
- ◆ Be positive rather than negative.
- ◆ Ask the reader questions.
- ◆ Use contractions — we're, can't.

Do say this…	Don't say this…
'You should keep all candidate work for verification.'	'Centres should retain candidates' work for verification.'
'So, exam day has finally arrived and you've prepared for it as much as you can. Here are some tips to help you do the best you can.'	'SQA has gathered relevant information together to assist candidates at the point of sitting exams.'

Further reading

The Tone of Voice module of the Clear and Confident Writing course on SQA Academy.

MailChimp is an email service provider that helps marketing departments send bulk emails to clients, customers, and other interested parties. You may find MailChimp's guidance on voice and tone useful:

http://voiceandtone.com/

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Web pages

People don't read text on a website in the way that they read printed material. They scan, rather than scrutinise. They pick out headings and key words, rather than read everything chronologically and line-by-line. They also tend to spend less time reading online than they would reading print.

Also, because of the nature of the internet, the order in which we present information on the site may not be the same order in which it is read by the user. They may jump to a specific location within the site from a link or search result, and so not have the background knowledge of the preceding pages.

So when producing information for online publication, the first thing you need to ask is: what is the most appropriate way to display your information? Would it be better for the reader if it was:

♦ a single web page or series of web pages forming a section of the website
♦ a separate stand-alone website
♦ an interactive application
♦ a file that users can download or print and read at their leisure?

General tips and best practice

All web pages should be self-contained and self-explanatory. If a reader lands on a page with no knowledge of the preceding pages, they should still be able to make sense of the information provided.

♦ Use plain English and keep specialised terminology to a minimum. If someone has to reread a sentence or phrase to clarify the meaning, then the text is not fit for purpose.
♦ Use headings and subheadings that provide information to your reader.
♦ Aim to have one key idea in each paragraph. Structure paragraphs so that the conclusion or key idea is in the first sentence and then provide more detail in the sentences that follow.
♦ Keep text to a minimum.
♦ Use bulleted lists to break up the information so that readers can easily find what they are looking for.
♦ Introduce information appropriately and use titles that explain the context. It's not enough to provide a link or document title, for example 'SQA workshop presentation' — as it could be referring to any workshop that has been held by SQA.
♦ Don't repeat information on a web page — provide a link to the initial source.

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Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a popular source partly because the content is free to use — but there are conditions that need to be adhered to. See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Copyrights#Reusers.27_rights_and_obligations

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Word — readability statistics

Flesch readability statistics are based on the average sentence length, the number of difficult words, the number of passive sentences, and paragraph length.

You can take your checking a bit further with a little application that will tell you how readable your writing is. Go to File > Options > Proofing and make sure that the 'Show readability statistics' option is ticked.
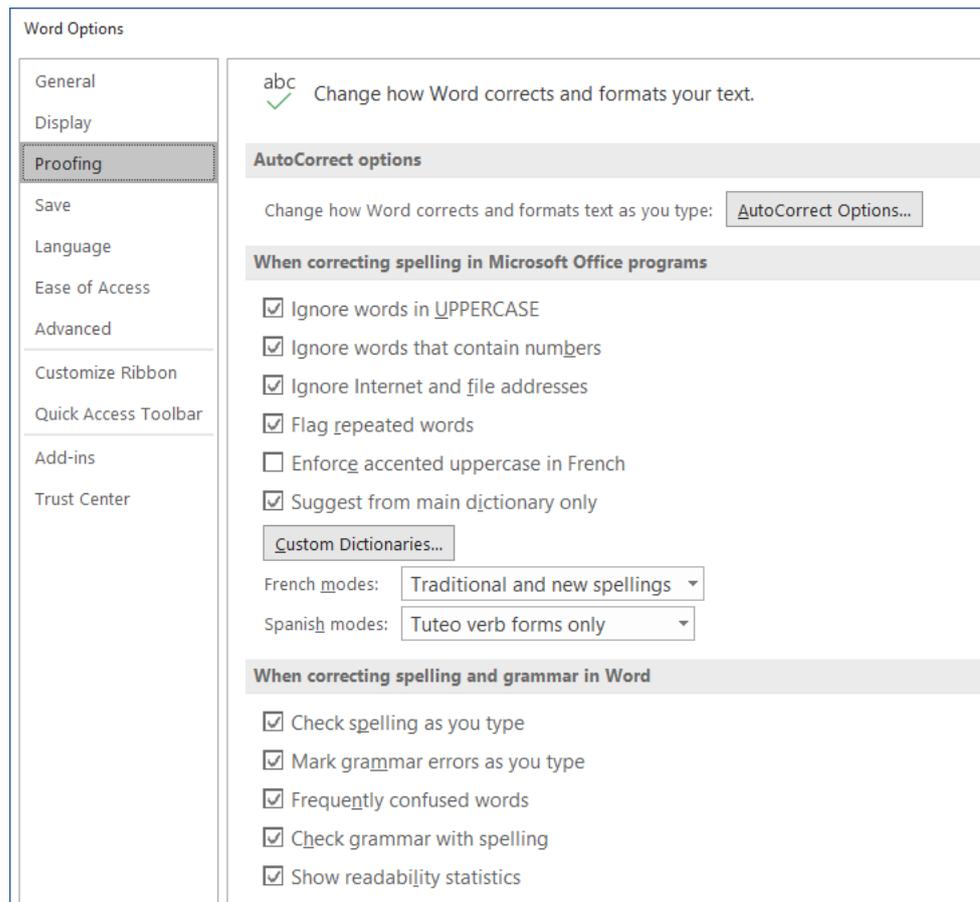
Then the next time you run the spellchecker, a window like the following will appear:

Readability Statistics

Counts

Words	60
Characters	315
Paragraphs	2
Sentences	3

Averages

Sentences per Paragraph	1.5
Words per Sentence	20.0
Characters per Word	5.1

Readability

Flesch Reading Ease	52.5
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10.8
Passive Sentences	0.0%

OK

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 for an audience of teachers, 50 and over for the general public, and 60 or over for learners. If your score is low, you can use the information under 'Averages' to improve it.

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Word — spellcheck

Always use the spellchecker, though you'll have to decide whether the suggestion offered is indeed correct. Remember we use 'organise' not 'organize'. Before you use the spellchecker, please make sure that your document's language is set as UK English (go to File > Options > Language).
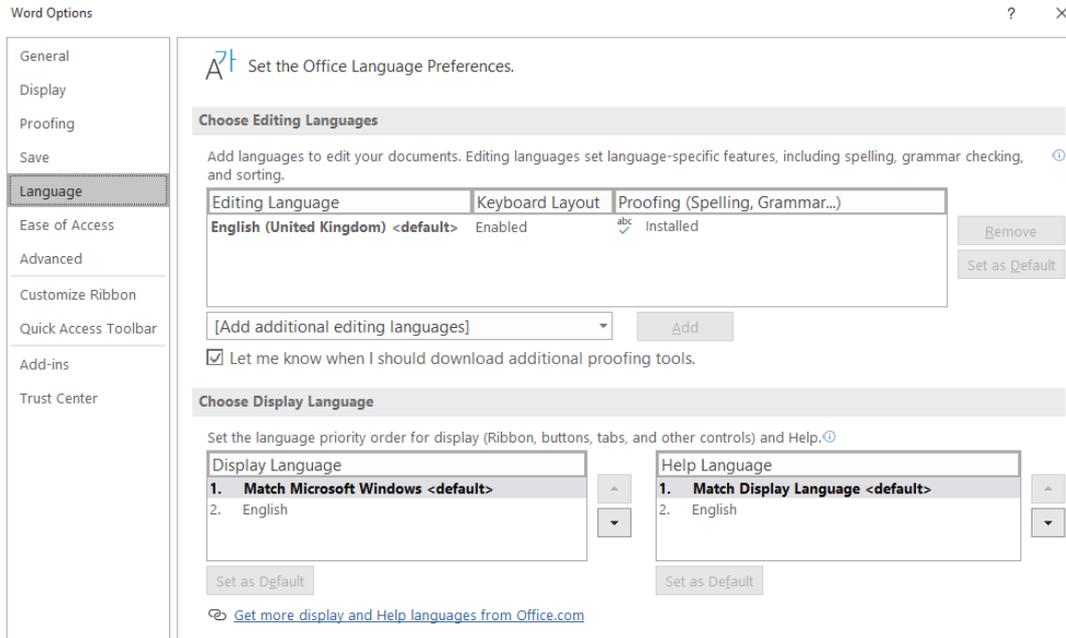
Caution!

Word's checking tools cannot catch words that are spelled correctly but which don't make sense. 'Leaner' instead of 'learner' is a common slip that isn't detected by a spellcheck.

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Words we prefer to 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 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.

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 easy to read. If you're writing for teachers and lecturers, 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.

Words to think twice about before using

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'.

'Candidates will already have developed ~~a number of~~ **some** of the skills, behaviours and knowledge.'

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** 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.

'Self-awareness ~~in relation to~~ of relationships…'

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'. Usually 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?

with reference to: can be replaced with 'about'

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:	Instead, write:
additional	more
as indicated above	as we've already said, or see the section on ...
as itemised below	here is a list
as mentioned previously	as we've already said
as regards/with regard to	about
assist	help
by means of	by
capability	ability
consequently	then
consist of	be made up of
constitutes	is, makes, builds up to
effect (as verb)	make, do
facilitate	help
for the purposes of	for
function	role, work, job

further	more
have responsibility for	be in charge of, deal with
in accordance with	under, following
in addition	also, as well
in conjunction with	with
in order to	to
in relation to	about, of
legislation	law, laws
necessitate	cause
obtain	get
prior to	before
proficiency	skill
regarding	about, on, to, of
relating to	about, on, to, of
require to	need to, have to
sufficient	enough
terminate	end, stop, finish
therefore	so
undertake	do, try for
until such time as	until
utilise	use
with reference to	about
within (unless you mean 'inside')	in

Going forward, we need to address the issue of clichés. Its literally not rocket science but a little thinking outside of the box will address the issue.

Every underlined term in the previous paragraph has been nominated as a 'most-annoying cliché'. It is best not to use them because tired terms switch off attention — which leads to readers missing your message.

Plain English Campaign — Clichés

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Writing 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 lecturers.

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 depersonalised, 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'.

Do say …
'**Candidates** will carry out a practical exercise to show **they** can accurately complete the registration procedures for six bookings.'

Don't say …
'Each **candidate** will carry out a practical exercise to show **he/she** can accurately complete the registration procedures for six bookings.'

Note: it's not wrong to use 'they' for a single person (for example to say 'if a candidate is ill, they might be eligible for special consideration') and it allows us to use language that is gender neutral.

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Writing the name of the organisation

If your document has our logo on it, you can refer to 'SQA' in the text.

Elsewhere, though, give the name in full when you first use it. After this, you can say 'SQA'. Don't use 'the Authority', as it can be confused with 'education authority', and might be taken as pompous.

When giving the name in its abbreviated form, use 'SQA' not 'the SQA'.

Do say …	Don't say …
'You can complain to SQA if you think that a centre has done something wrong.'	'You can complain to **the** SQA if you think that a centre has done something wrong.'

Internal communications

If you need to refer to the offices in Dalkeith and Glasgow, use 'SQA Lowden' and 'SQA Optima'.

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