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## How to write about your research for non-academic audiences

AsiaEdit Author Success Webinar  
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1 Plain English language principles

2 Writing to engage stakeholders

3 Turning your findings into news

Help your audience

1 Plain English language principles

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## Can you “translate” these?

**A**  
**X**



Felicitations are bestowed upon you on the occasion of the anniversary of the 24-hour segment of time during which you were delivered into this world!

**B**  
**X**

I don't wish you to retract sentimentality opposed to sadness while not forgetting the inverse of a night of death!

**C**  
**X**

It goes without saying, without beating around the bush: Accept, if you please, my invocation of feelings of contentment to, once again, annually commemorate the day on which you were born, typically treated as an event fit for celebration, marked by the giving, and receiving, of presents and, commonly, of a festive cake bearing ignited candles in a quantity equivalent to your chronological age!

**KISS:**  Happy birthday! 

*Keep it short and simple*

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Communicate effectively 1


1 Plain English language principles


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## What is plain language?

 plainlanguage.gov

 Plain English Campaign  
Fighting for crystal-clear communication since 1976

 **PLAIN** Plain Language Association International

 Collins

 Merriam-Webster

- “Plain language (also called plain writing or plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.”
- “...a message, written with the reader in mind and with the right tone of voice, that is clear and concise”
- “A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.”
- “...language that is clear and easy to understand, with no ambiguity or unnecessarily difficult words”
- “...language unconcealed by any cryptographic process”

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Communicate effectively 2


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## Goals of using plain language

 **C** **Congruous**


- **Matches** context, purpose, (non-specialist) audience

 **C** **Clear**

- **Is simple** but not misleading or ambiguous (factually & grammatically accurate)

 **C** **Concise**

- **Is relatable, respectful, empathic**

 **C** **Correct**

- ✓ Suits audience's knowledge, expectations, culture & formality/tone
- ✓ Sounds collegial, eliminates barriers, is unbiased
- ✓ Anticipates audience concerns/Qs
- ✓ Easy/fast to **read, understand, navigate, use, remember, recall**
- ✓ Makes sense & achieves aim
- ✓ Elicits appropriate action/response/change

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Audience awareness 1

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## Specialist English

Specialist language

- Special names & terms ✓
- Specialist jargon ?
- Specialist slang X

Academese	Meta-analyses require a priori adjustment to account for publication-, reporting- or sampling-related confounding.
Officialese, Bureaucratese	Objection to an assessment must be lodged within one month of the date of issuance of the notice of assessment.
Legalese	Words and phrases herein, including acknowledgment hereof, shall be construed as in the singular or plural number according to the context.
Businessese, Commercialese	In Q3 we will leverage synergies in market segments for value creation amid pandemic headwinds impacting our bottom line.
Medicalese	Refrain from overly tight suturing and practice cauterisation sparingly, as both may potentially lead to ischemic sequelae.

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Audience awareness 2

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*Paying by cheque:*

- Make your cheque payable to...
- Don't fold your cheque or fasten it to any notes or papers you are sending in the same envelope

**X** *Because engine oil contains toxic chemicals, don't allow it to contact your skin for prolonged periods.*  
→ **Engine oil is poisonous. You must not let it touch your skin.**

## Types of plain language

**"Plain English" Campaign**  
**Simple, direct talking style** for public information (eg, "I", "you", "don't", imperatives): <https://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

**Simplified Technical English**  
**Limited vocabulary/grammar** to reduce ambiguity & aid translation (eg, 20-25 words per sentence; active voice; clear instructions): <https://asd-ste100.org/>

**Controlled English** Eg, **aviation English** (eg, Roger = received, Wilco = I will comply, Alpha/Bravo/Charlie... = A/B/C...; no "I"/"you")

**Basic English** **Basic language/grammar** for learners & Ogden's 850 words: <http://ogden.basic-english.org>

**Oxford word lists** **Core word lists** (3000 or 5000 or Academic) for learners: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/wordlist/>

**Easy English** For people with **learning issues** (eg, 10-word sentences; use of pictures): <https://accesseasyenglish.com.au/>

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Connecting with audiences 1

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<https://vacheung.com/2017/10/academic-conference-posters-suok/africanroadsign/>

## Is this a good example?

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Connecting with audiences 2

1 Plain English language principles

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<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/communication/print-resources/Test-Soon-Treat-Early.pdf>

## Public notices/literature/letters



- Talking style
- Logical organisation (eg, Purpose & Problem-Solution-Action-Contact)
- Short sentences to reduce effort
- Easy-to-follow grammar & common, everyday words
  - Active voice, 1st/2nd person pronouns (*Defined reader = You & I; sender = We*)
  - Contractions (*can't, don't, isn't, doesn't*) [but not: *wouldn't've, you're*]
  - Direct instructions (*must/should*)
- Easy-to-read visual/design elements
  - Left-aligned text; good use of fonts, bold, italics, colours, spacing
  - Bulleted lists, tables, headings
- Online material
  - Shorter paragraphs, lots of spacing
  - Clear anchor text for links (*Read the full report...*)
  - "Alt" text for images if not captioned (<125 characters)

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Connecting with audiences 3

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<https://plainenglish.co.uk/how-to-write-in-plain-english.html>  
<https://www.plaintanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf>

## Plain writing principles

- Be **congruous**: [Test your draft with audience]
  - Be polite, human, helpful
  - Use short, everyday words appropriate to audience; no jargon/slang
  - Explain technical words & abbreviations
  - Be direct/concrete: personal pronouns, contractions, imperatives if in genre
- Be **clear**:
  - Keep Subject, Verb, Object close together; avoid embedding & interruptions
  - Prefer active verbs, present tense
  - Avoid using nouns instead of verbs
  - Clarify pronouns (It, They, This, These): repeat noun or use other word (*The X was in the Y... #The X...*)
  - Clarify modifiers (I only drink only water)
- Be **concise**: [Read it out loud to test]
  - <20 words per sentence; **1 main idea**  
7 lines per paragraph, **1 main topic**
  - Delete repeated, redundant & empty words
- Be **correct**:
  - Use correct grammar & punctuation
  - Don't oversimplify or mislead: use same **accuracy, precision, certainty, frequency, quantity, scope** as source
  - Provide complete, unbiased information
- **Increase readability**:
  - Organise & write "chunks" logically; be consistent (~~X~~*teenagers*, then *teens*, *youths*)
  - [Flesch Reading Ease 100%; Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of 7th grade (12 to 13 years)]
  - Use design/layout features, headings, lists, glossary/text boxes if in genre

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### Don't confuse your readers



### Can these be improved?

A



Before consumption of drink by mouth people raise glass, clink glass, and "Cheers" is said.



Before drinking people raise glasses, clink them together, and say "Cheers".



Before drinking, people raise glasses, clink them together, and say "Cheers".

B



My students were inspired by their parents, Superman and Wonder Woman



My students were inspired by their parents, Superman, and Wonder Woman

C



The interviewee said she was lucky to meet her grandmother, Princess Diana, and Prince Charles. She said...



The interviewee said she was lucky to meet her grandmother, Princess Diana and Prince Charles. **The interviewee** said...

Be clear & concise 1

2 Writing to engage stakeholders

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## Delete unneeded words

Redundancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>We retrieved and reanalyzed X again.</del></li> <li>• <del>Compulsory assessment is required.</del></li> </ul>
Already understood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>The extremely unique samples were blue in colour and spherical in 3D shape.</del></li> <li>• <del>The future plan was to exit from the stage by jumping off of it.</del></li> </ul>
Conversational space fillers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>The movie was literally actually definitely entertaining.</del></li> <li>• <del>Work-wise, when it comes to my current workload situation at this moment in time, it is so heavy, you won't believe it.</del></li> </ul>
Hesitation & clichés	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>What I'd like to throw into the pot is my two cents' worth,...</del></li> <li>• <del>I myself think, from the top of my head, in my opinion,</del></li> </ul>
Repeated terms in abbreviations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <del>Treatment for AIDS syndrome</del></li> <li>• <del>Type in your PIN number</del></li> </ul>

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Be clear & concise 2

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## Simplify when possible

Turn (most) passives to actives	<p><del>X has been discovered by them.</del> → <b><i>They discovered X.</i></b></p> <p><b>But to avoid blame / if doer is unknown:</b></p> <p><del>Any mistakes that were found were quickly corrected.</del></p>
Recast indirect, abstract phrases; noun strings; wordiness	<p><del>Do not use X unless in the event that it is used under the prevailing ambient atmospheric conditions, namely, the same temperature which the air of the room is at.</del> → <b><i>Use X at room temperature.</i></b></p>
Release hidden verbs	<p><del>They performed a comparison between X and Y.</del></p> <p>→ <b><i>They compared X and Y.</i></b></p>
Rewrite slang, jargon, clichés	<p><del>How'd you prep for the exam to pass with flying colours?</del> → <b><i>How do I prepare for the examination?</i></b></p>
Shorten words, double -ves, It/There	<p><del>It was apparent there were no methodologies utilised for analysis purposes that had not been previously published.</del></p> <p>→ <b><i>We used published analytical methods.</i></b></p>

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Fulfil expectations

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## Expected message flow

<b>Topic</b> → <b>Comment</b>	The sentence <b>topic</b> goes first in the sentence, before the comment. Going first in a sentence before the comment is <b>the topic</b> .
<b>Old</b> → <b>New</b>	A topic sentence usually starts each paragraph. <b>That sentence</b> is then followed by the supporting sentences. The support then follows <b>it</b> . / You then provide the support for <b>it</b> .
<b>Short</b> → <b>Long</b>	The <b>subject</b> <b>should not be too far away from its verb</b> . The subject, to avoid causing reader confusion and to help with reading comprehension, <b>should not be too far away from its verb</b> .
<b>Transition/signal</b>	<b>To help the audience</b> , add introductory phrases to sentences. <b>Then</b> , readers will be able to follow your message more easily.
<b>Main news</b>	In news writing, the first topic sentence of the whole text should be the main news, conclusion, or key message.

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Writing for non-specialists

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CC BY: Wainstein et al. (2022), PLoS Med 19(4): e1003969. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003969>

## Plain-language abstract/summary

**Why was this study done?**

- Previous studies have shown that **acute kidney injury (AKI)** is a common problem among hospitalised patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).
- The current **biochemical criteria used to diagnose AKI** may be insufficient to capture AKI that develops in the community and is recovering by the time a patient presents to hospital....

**What did the researchers do and find?**

- In this **prospective study**, we examined **AKI incidence, severity, and outcomes** among a large international cohort of patients with COVID-19 using both a traditional and extended definition of AKI.
- We found that the extended definition identified almost twice as many cases of AKI than the traditional definition (31.7% versus 16.8%)....

**What do these findings mean?**

- The current definition of AKI fails to identify a large group of patients with AKI that appears to develop in the community or early in the hospital admission....

**Could be based on:**

- **WH** questions (short or long bullets)
  - What do we know?
  - Why was this study needed?
  - What was done?
  - What was found?
  - What does this mean?
- **IMRaC** style abstract (itemised or 1 paragraph):
  - Introduction, Methods, Results & Conclusion

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Writing for the public

2 Writing to engage stakeholders

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CC BY: <https://elifesciences.org/digests/72811/germ-cells-in-a-dish>

## Lay summary

**Germ cells in a dish**  
 In humans and other animals, eggs and sperm are unique cells that pass on genetic material to the next generation. They originate from a **small group of cells called primordial germ cells** that form early in life in the developing embryo....

The process by which primordial germ cells are made in humans is very different to how primordial germ cells are made in mice and other so-called model animals that are commonly used in research....

**Jo et al.** used a technique called micropatterning to control the shape and size of groups of human stem cells growing in a laboratory dish. Treating these cells with a signal known as BMP4 gave rise to cells that resembled primordial germ cells. The team then used this system as a model to study how primordial germ cells form in humans. The experiments found that....

Defects in eggs and sperm may lead to infertility; therefore, the findings of **Jo et al.** have the potential to help researchers develop new fertility treatments...

**Could be based on:**

- 1 paragraph of simplified brief summary of IMRaC style abstract
- Bulleted highlights
- Longer, more detailed than abstract:
  - (Lay title)
  - Explanatory introduction paragraph(s)
  - Summary of study in IMRaC order, in the 3rd person
  - Implications/ importance, future
  - +/-illustration

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Publish and nourish 1

2 Writing to engage stakeholders

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## Research dissemination

```

            graph TD
            A[Publish or perish] --> B[Publish and perish]
            A --> C[Publish and flourish]
            C --> D[Publish and nourish]
            
```

- Misinformation
- Disinformation
- Unethical practices
- Predatory journals
- [www.ThinkCheckSubmit.org](http://www.ThinkCheckSubmit.org)

- Open Access
- Citations
- Academic conferences, debate & clarifications

- Knowledge exchange
- Research mobilisation
  - Open Research
  - Societal impact
- Sustainable development goals

- Translate / summarise / adapt for stakeholders
- Promote research to non-academic audiences
  - Non-specialist seminars, events
  - Brief presentations: 3-minute thesis (3MT), video-abstract, lightning talk, Pecha Kucha (20 x 20 s)
  - Interesting hook: fact, statistic, paradox, question, "Imagine", quotation

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Publish and nourish 2

2 Writing to engage stakeholders

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## Post-publication non-technical writing

	Plain-language / lay version	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For academics or non-academics (public/patients/funder/trial registry)?</li> <li>Abstract or shorter/longer summary?</li> <li>Unbiased, ethical (not commercial, no Col), give trial #, link to article</li> </ul>
	Social media posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepared by journal/university/you? Word limit? Link to article/summary?</li> <li><u>May not be allowed</u> if direct drug/device industry marketing</li> <li>Be ready for comments</li> </ul>
	News release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepared by journal/university/you?</li> <li>For media or news platform? For university website or blog?</li> <li>Be ready for interviews &amp; to provide additional <u>simple</u> illustrations</li> </ul>
	Grant funder documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Proposal abstract</b> or <b>Project report</b> (may be made public)</li> <li><b>Problem–Gap/Q/hypothesis–Aim–Approach–(Data)–Outcomes–Impact</b></li> </ul>
	Policy brief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Advocacy brief</b> (specific advice on urgent issue) or <b>Objective brief</b> (review)</li> <li><b>Executive summary + Report</b> [Context–Problem–Analysis–Proposed solutions–Evaluation of solutions/evidence–Recommendation] + <b>References</b></li> </ul>

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3 Turning your findings into news

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Highlighting findings

3 Turning your findings into news

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## Are these in plain English?

1. We, Dr A, Dr B, and Dr C, based at the University of X, recently published a paper in the prestigious journal Y on our creation of a new efficient window glass surface coat cleaning system that takes place without current occupant or resident or owner manual involvement.	✘	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What's the news?</li> <li>Noun strings</li> <li>Too wordy</li> </ul>
2. We recently mass-manufactured a window that cleaned itself on its own, autonomously and automatically without human intervention.	✘	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vague; tense</li> <li>Redundancy</li> <li>Long words</li> </ul>
3. We made a miracle dirt-proof glass coating, so you don't have to clean your windows ever again!	✘	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tense, precision</li> <li>"You don't"</li> <li>Too dramatic</li> </ul>
4. We have invented a dirt-proof coating for glass that reduces the need for cleaning.	✔	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Present perfect</li> <li>Accurate</li> </ul>

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News style


3 Turning your findings into news

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## How should I "translate" my paper?


### Newsworthiness

- Use ~500 words; don't copy Abstract & paper title
- Frontload key point & story angle: **timely, wide interest & impact**
- Explain technical terms in reverse, eg, "Cancer spread (metastasis)", or use author quote
- Explain significance / context objectively (eg, give evidence, use author quote)
- Cite & link to peer-reviewed source



### General audiences

- Use **short, direct, familiar words** ("furnish" → "give")
- Beware of **cultural differences**: jokes, puns, metaphors, idioms ("~~piece of cake~~", "GOAT")
- Use **clear analogies** & references ("like carrying 16 elephants", "a quarter of the width of a human hair", but not "~~the virus is very hungry~~")
- Avoid **phrasal verbs**: get back (return), take off (depart), put off (delay), drop off (fall asleep)
- Use **unbiased**, objective, neutral language ("staff", "patients with diabetes")
- Add **degree** of certainty, stance, eg, reporting verbs:  
*They **denied** > **objected** > **challenged** > **questioned** > stated < *speculated* < *hypothesised* < **confirmed***



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Research promotion

3 Turning your findings into news

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## Perfect pitches in plain English



### Elevator pitch/speech, Lift speech

- 1) Greeting & introduction
- 2) Who you help, What you help them with
- 3) How you help them


### Announce project "title"

- Don't copy title of article / grant / pilot study / preprint
- Grab attention: short key message in present tense
  - Solution for problem
  - Achievements, findings, conclusion
  - Implications, importance, benefits
- Beware of unintended meaning: "Brain research unit gets new head"

Hello, I'm X, from the University of Y. Our team helps parents teach their children life-long soft skills, by providing online apps.

CL

EARLY

*Mobile app to support parent-assisted science news literacy education in domestic settings* ❌

*New mobile app helps parents teach kids to spot fake science news* ✅

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News story structure 1

3 Turning your findings into news

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## Hard (breaking) news

Journal article

Hard news

Abstract

Intro

Methods

Results

Conclusion

↗

News = Conclusion

Details

Background/  
Future/  
Quote

Headline is in present simple tense

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (or Embargoed for Release...)

CITY NAME, Date—This message is important news, according to a research team at A....

Or Researchers at B have discovered C, which may change D...

The findings, reported in Journal E [+ref/link], revealed that F [+ key data]... F functions like a key to unlock G....

"It had been a mystery until now how F works," said/says Dr H, lead study author....

The team's study improves on prior K... "Our discovery adds to global efforts in L and illustrates our university's commitment to M," said/says Dr H.

### XXX -END- -Ends- -30-  
Glossary, About Institution, Contact details...

1. Lede/lead (25 words):

What, Who, Where, When? What is important, new, unusual, urgent?

2. Elaboration & Support:

Explain lede; quotes for human interest, definition, clarification

3. Context & Evaluation:

Why, How, So what, Now what? Focus on meaning, not methods

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3 Turning your findings into news

News story structure 2

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### Soft news & features

**Soft news**

Intro/Teaser

Conclusion  
Details  
Background/  
Quote  
Implications/  
Call to action

**1. Hook:** Q, quote, statistic, issue, event, gap, problem  
When was the last time you did A?...  
*Or* B is important for...  
But limiting its use is...

**2. Delayed lede**  
**Now**, researchers at C have discovered D, which will change E.

**3. Kicker:** Summary, future, moral, advice, memorable message  
"We all need to recycle more," says Dr X.

**1. Bait:** Describe scene, character, anecdote, specific aim/dilemma  
Mr X wants to be the first 100-year-old to Y.... However,...

**2. Hook:** Give clue to lede  
Today, Mr X is one step closer, thanks to work being done at Z...

**3. Delayed lede & significance (nut graf)**  
Chemists at Z have now invented A. Their invention joins B and C to enable D, and eventually Y.

**4. Conclusion:** wrap-up & kicker  
So, as long as Mr X continues exercising and applying D, his dream of Y will soon come true...  
..."I want to show the world that anybody can do Y!" he added.

**News feature**

Setting/  
synopsis/  
foreshadow

Teaser

Background

1<sup>st</sup> Conclusion  
Details

Background/  
Transition

2<sup>nd</sup> Conclusion  
Details

Call back/  
Implications/  
Call to action

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3 Turning your findings into news

News story structure 3

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<https://www.bbc.com/news>

**Examples**

**A**

**Extinction: Why scientists are freezing threatened species in 'biobanks'**

"He's gone," murmurs Chester Zoo vet Gabby Drake, holding a stethoscope to the feathered chest of a 28-year-old, bright red tropical parrot....

**News feature**

**B**

**Rosalind Franklin centenary: 'She would have been totally amazed'**

Scientist Rosalind Franklin would have been "totally amazed" that 100 years after her birth she is being commemorated, according to her sister....

**Soft news**

**C**

**Monkeypox: 80 cases confirmed in 12 countries**

More than 80 cases of monkeypox have been confirmed in at least 12 countries. The World Health Organization has said another 50 suspected cases are being investigated....

**Hard news**

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Grammar points

3 Turning your findings into news

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**Watch out**

- **Modifiers:** Looking dull, we repainted the walls. → *Because the walls looked dull, we repainted them.*
- **Indirect speech:** Our team told the students, "You need to brush your teeth twice a day." → *The team told the students they needed to brush their teeth twice a day, / ... that people need to brush...*
- **Top heaviness:** Doing X, Y, and Z in that order every day is important. → *It is important to...*
- **List logic:** To enter university, preschool, primary and high school pupils are learning to code. → *To improve their chances of entering university, pupils at preschool, primary school, and high school...*

**Non-restrictive (non-defining) vs restrictive (defining) modifiers**

- **? The mice, which had received drug A, were larger.** [= all mice; larger after treatment?] → *The mice which/that had received drug A were larger.* [= some mice; larger than the untreated mice?]
- **Team leader, Dr X said** → *Team leader Dr X said / The team leader, Dr X, said / Dr X, (the) team leader, said*

**Don't simplify too much**

- **"That":** He reported last year the rate was low. → *He reported that last year... / He reported last year that...*
- She confirmed being lazy is not good. → *She confirmed that being lazy is not good.*
- He lost the message he received the delivery. → *He lost the message that he received the delivery.*
- **Relative clauses:** Forms submitted were checked. → *Forms that had been submitted... / Submitted forms...*
- **Indirect objects:** They made children salad for 10 years. → *They made salad for children for 10 years.*
- **Negative reasons:** X didn't continue because of the cost. → *X didn't continue, because of the cost.*

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News tips

3 Turning your findings into news

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**Write ethically:**

- **Don't mislead** or scare (eg, "cure", relative vs absolute % or risk, correlation vs cause, opinion vs fact, may vs will)
- **Declare** funding source and any Col
- **Check** © of material; no plagiarism

**Cite source (note if journal embargo):**

- Peer-reviewed reference / link
- Evidence & study type (in vitro/in vivo/animals vs humans)
- State limitations [[Help improve research news quality!](#)]

**Use plain English:**

- ? Informal, personal, talking (**you can't**)
- ? Semiformal personal (**you cannot**)
- ? (Semi)formal distant, 3rd-person (**one cannot / ...is not allowed**)

**Pitch to journalists:**

- Email media release with tailored message to specific journalist (**WIIFM?** What's in it for me?)
- Argue/frame why story angle is news or fits a theme/debate
- Highlight **PITCH**: Proximity, Impact, Timeliness, Conflict, Human Interest

**Be helpful, interesting:**

- Subheadings as previews, topic/context first, SVO, logical sequence, examples
- Vary sentence & para. length/structure; add an illustration
- Edit/proofread/test (there/their/they're)

**Watch tenses:**

- **Present** in strong headline
- **Present perfect** in lede / topic sentences
- **Simple past** if finished; **present** if still true

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*Thank you!*

