Writing for NHSGGC, including digital channels

Introduction

This guide is to support **everyone** in writing well.
You will find information on general requirements for **digital platforms**.
Resources and references provide tools for you to explore and develop **writing skills**.
It will take around **eight minutes** to read.

Our website and digital channels should be [safe, effective and person centred](#). Just like every aspect of our professional practice[1].

There is a saying 'If I had more time [I would have written a shorter letter](#)'[2]. Concise and clear writing takes time and effort. But when our readers are informed and prepared they may take up less time and effort when we meet them face to face. We are more likely to meet them at the **right time**, in the **right place**, for the **right care** or interaction. **Good writing is part of great care**.

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[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/healthcare-quality-strategy-nhsscotland/pages/4/

[2] https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/04/28/shorter-letter/

Before you start

Who is your audience?

Whenever you are writing, you should be writing for your audience. Who are they?

- Patients?
- Students?
- Children?
- Experienced professionals in a particular field?

So first - research your audience. Find out about them. What are their particular needs or concerns? Keep in mind the people who will know least, whatever your audience. Then write for them.

Understand online behaviours

Most people 'scan and skim' online before deciding to read an article. They pick out headings or lists and look for clues on whether a page matches what they are looking for[3]. There is a place for long form articles, but we have to earn attention first.

Young people 'read' even less. They are likely to skip a page if they don't see what they are looking for – even if it is there. You won't have their whole attention - young adults are likely to multi-task on their smart phones. (27% of 18-34s engage in at least five online activities while commuting; but only 9% of over-35s do so[4]).

What technology are they using?

More than 6 in 10 of our own web users are on **mobiles** and this number is climbing. Half of our mobile users are using an iPhone (Google Analytics for www.nhsggc.org.uk May 2019).

In 2017, a quarter of adults (26%) went online only through devices other than a computer.

For older adults in the UK (75 years up) 7 in 10 now use a smart phone in some way.[5] (OFCOM)

How does this affect writing?

We need to **write for small screens**. This means **short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.** Most of our audience will give up instantly if offered long blocks of text.
Text still has real advantages over video and audio. It is quick to load and doesn't consume large data allowances for our audience. Text is effective for assistive technology such as screen readers.

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[3] https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/

[4] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/cmr/cmr-2018/report

[5] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/113222/Adults-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-Report-2018.pdf

Starting to write

Ask yourself:

What are my readers looking for? Choose some key words, or ask people what they would like to know. The most persuasive writing addresses the users' need. Focus on what someone needs or wants to know, before what it's convenient for us to tell them.

How much do they already know? Don't explain past systems or previous care if that's not needed. Do explain terms or names that might not be familiar – for example Sandyford or WestMARC.

How much do they want/need to know? Don't overwhelm readers with too much information. You can always add another page or article.

What do I need to say? Make sure to include the essentials – ask:

- **Who** is this for or about?
- **What** is the key message or information point?
- **When** is this happening or **when** does my patient need to know/do this?
- **Where** will this happen – how will people get there?
- **Why** are we doing this? **Why** does my reader need to know?
- **What happens next**? Let people know exactly what action you want them to take, be very specific.

Next identify the most important information from this list. **Put this first** in your text. Catch people in the few seconds while you have their attention**.**

What do you want to say? Is there anything extra that will make this more useful, more human or more interesting? If there is great extra content consider another article or page.

How do you want to say it? Be professional. Be warm and human too. Consider your context. Using 'we' and 'us' is often more appropriate than 'NHSGGC' 'the Board' 'the service'. Addressing people as 'you' is better than 'patients' or 'service users'.

Is existing material fit for purpose? You might have existing text. It might have most of the content you need. Read it critically. **Is there a shorter or simpler way to write this? Is it written for my audience?** Use what is good. Avoid 'cut and paste' or uploading leaflets or posters without writing good text to introduce or support them. Check that everything is still correct. See if the content can be improved.

Make notes as you go and get some of the information down.

Structure

Remember the 'skim and scan' tactic we all use when reading online. Aim to communicate clearly and quickly. Look at your content and decide where you can use:

- **Headings**   Choose straightforward titles that tell readers what the page is about. Use a meaningful title of up to 70 characters. Give specific information on what the page is about and where it refers to.
- **Summary information**   Consider starting with 1 short sentence. Say who the page is for or what it's about.
- **Subheadings**   Introduce new information or topics one at a time. Stick to one key piece of information or idea in each paragraph.
- **Lists or bullet points** These are quick and easy to scan.
- **Question and answer formats**   Show your audience if their questions will be answered on this page.
- **Links**   Use links to share new or extra information, related pages, a definition or help page. Appropriate external and internal links add authority to your page. Avoid using 'Click here for more'. Make links part of your sentence. If reputable sites provide the information you need, consider a link instead of rewriting content. For example NHS Inform or NHS 24.

Using these elements to lay out text will also [optimise it for search engines](#). Your audience will be more likely to find your writing once it is published online.

Style points

Describing our organisation

We use NHSGGC or NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Not NHS GG&C or NHSGG&C. Even better say 'We', 'our' and 'us'. Don't use 'the Board' unless you are referring to a meeting or decision of the actual Board.

Numbers and time

The rules for **writing numbers online** [6] differ from those for print so:

- Write numbers with digits, not letters (23, not twenty-three)
- Use numerals even when the number is the first word in a sentence or bullet point
- Use numerals for big numbers up to one billon (2,000,000 is better than two million)
- When a number is not specific use words – for example 'We tested hundreds of samples' but 'We tested 457 samples'

Time should not be in the 24 hour clock, but as follows:

9.00am - not 0900, or 09:00

2.30pm - not 1430 or 14:30, or 14.30

Language

Avoid very colloquial language. Speakers of other languages will most likely understand Standard English words. Contractions such as 'you're' instead of 'you are', 'don't' instead of 'do not' are more engaging and easier to understand. There's room for humour, but use it sparingly. Be a little more formal in writing than when speaking. Watch for ambiguity.

Avoid the passive voice: choose 'the team decided', not 'it was decided by the team'.

Write about people positively. Think about **inclusive language**. Know how the people you are writing for like to describe themselves. Check if there are descriptions that are not suitable. There are NICE guidelines here to help you with many dos and dont's for healthcare professionals. **Refresh your knowledge**. Remember - conditions describe what a person has, not what a person is.

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[6] https://www.nngroup.com/articles/web-writing-show-numbers-as-numerals/

Stick to **straightforward language**. [We all appreciate simpler, clearer writing](#)[7]. It saves our time and energy. We can concentrate on the message.

- Some of us do not find reading easy – the average reading age in Scotland is around 11 years[8]
- Some of us do not have English as a first language. The 2011 Scottish Census found that more than 150 languages other than English are used in Scottish homes
- Some of us are anxious or distressed about our health or a loved one
- We all know how it is to be busy, distracted, working in a noisy environment, or have too much to do

If you need to use **clinical or technical terms** give a lay term or clear definitions alongside them, for example 'difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)'.

Keep asking yourself - **is there a shorter or simpler way** to say what I need to?

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[7] https://www.nngroup.com/videos/plain-language-for-experts/

[8]

http://scottishhealthcouncil.org/patient__public_participation/participation_toolkit/written_information.aspx#.XNvbPOVKiM8

Write a first draft

Check your information is complete and accurate. Are all the phone numbers correct? Is all the information up to date? Do the links work? **Read over** your writing with our style points in mind.

Imagine what an outsider would make of your text. If possible **get a second opinion**. It's very difficult to proof your own work as you already know what you are trying to say. Get someone to peer-review your work. If you are writing for anyone who is not familiar with your topic, use feedback from someone from your target audience. **Rewrite** anything that confuses. **Add** any information that's missing.

At the very least set it aside to read with fresh eyes later.

Finishing your writing

Spell check your work and make corrections. Everyone makes spelling or typing errors sometimes. We prefer not to publish them all!

Is your text easily readable? We should not be publishing 'hard to read' content. Do you **know** how readable your writing is?

[Word has tools to check this](#).

You can also use the free online checker Hemingway http://hemingwayapp.com/. Hemingway will make suggestions to help you. It's a good resource to use to show others that a piece of writing is clear and fit for purpose, or not. [Here is an example](#) from our website that shows how a key piece of text was improved.

If you have used straightforward language and short sentences your draft should score well. If there is room for improvement then shorten sentences and choose simpler vocabulary. Use the thesaurus in Word [highlight a word and press SHIFT+F7] or try an online thesaurus such as [this one from Oxford Dictionaries](#).

If you need to make changes **reiterate** these checks until you have text that tells your story or shares your message in a straightforward, humane, interesting way.

At this point your text is ready to publish.

Revisit your page from time to time to check that nothing needs to be updated.

Help us to improve

If you have suggestions for making our content clearer please get in touch webteam@ggc.scot.nhs.uk

Resources

Top tips for online writing from Oxford dictionaries
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/writing-help/top-tips-for-online-writing

Talking about People - National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)
https://www.nice.org.uk/corporate/ecd1/chapter/talking-about-people

Guidance from the Government Digital Service – inclusion and accessibility
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication

Writing for online audiences. A free online course from Google (registration required)
https://learndigital.withgoogle.com/digitalgarage/course/promote-with-content/lesson/150

Scottish Health Council – toolkit for written information
http://scottishhealthcouncil.org/patient__public_participation/participation_toolkit/written_information.aspx#.XNvbPOVKiM8

Hemingway App - makes your writing bold and clear
http://hemingwayapp.com/

Word and Outlook – how to test readability
https://support.office.com/en-us/article/test-your-document-s-readability-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2

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The Communications Market 2018: Narrative report (OFCOM)
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/cmr/cmr-2018/report

Adults Media Use and Attitudes Report 2018 (OFCOM)
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/113222/Adults-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-Report-2018.pdf

Plain language for everyone, even experts (NielsenNorman Group)
https://www.nngroup.com/videos/plain-language-for-experts/

Show numbers as numerals
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/web-writing-show-numbers-as-numerals/