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Overview

Last Updated: 16/11/2020

Fair. Kind. Ambitious. Collaborative.

Those are our values and behaviours.

They exist to help us realise our vision of safe, effective and kind nursing and midwifery that improves everyone's health and wellbeing.

So we have to live up to them consistently, in every situation. Including when we write.

We use principles for   and   writing because they help us to   with people inside and outside the NMC. There are a few ways to sound   too.

Dense paragraphs of legalese and corporate jargon make life hard. If English isn't your first language, or you have learning difficulties, it's much, much harder.

Following this guide won't just help you stay true to our values and behaviours. It will help your readers, whoever they are.

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Fair

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We treat everyone fairly. It's at the heart of our role as a regulator and employer, and it's why people trust us.

So when we write, we use accurate, honest and transparent language.

Be active, not passive

'Your complaint will be investigated' is a passive sentence (it uses the passive voice).

It's not clear who'll be doing the investigating, so it could look like we're trying to hide something.

'We'll investigate your complaint' is easier to understand. It's more transparent. (And it forces you to use 'we', which sounds kinder.)

Research even shows passive sentences are harder to process. So they slow your readers down.

Keep your sentences short

If you've gone over about two lines of A4, go back and see if you can add a full-stop.

People are more likely to understand a shorter sentence than a longer one.

Give a 'why'

If you're explaining a decision you've made, always give the reason.

'Your application wasn't successful on this occasion because you didn't meet all the essential criteria' is much easier to accept than just 'Your application wasn't successful'.

Psychologist Ellen Langer tested the power of the word 'because'. She had people try to break into a queue for a photocopier. Some said 'May I use the xerox machine?', others said 'May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?'

The first group were successful 60 percent of the time. But that shot up to 93 percent for the second group, all because they said 'because'.

Avoid jargon

We don't use corporate-speak like 'going forward' ('in future' is simpler) or internal shorthand like 'legacy cohorts'. It's impersonal and confusing.

Technical terminology, on the other hand, is sometimes fine. By that, we mean specific terms that particular professions use. 'Fitness to practise' is one example.

Use it if you're sure your audience will understand.

Choose words for their precise meaning

Some words have specific meanings for us. Like 'rules', 'standards', 'guidance' and 'advice'.

We also use the word 'must' when we're talking about requirements in our rules and standards, and the word 'should' when we're talking about guidance we produce.

A readability checker gives you a score between 1 and 100, where a higher score means your writing is easier to understand. (As a rough guide, 30 is about the level of the Harvard Law Review, 60 is the BBC website, and 90 is Dr Seuss.)

Aim for 60 or above.

To use the readability checker in Word, tick the 'show readability statistics' box under 'file/options/proofing'. It'll give you a score each time you do a spellcheck.

Kind

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We act with kindness and in a way that values people, their insights, situations and experiences.

So when we write, we sound warm and human to show we care.

Being kind isn't just a fluffy 'nice to have'. It has a powerful effect on your reader.

In a __study from 2002, psychologist Nalini Ambady found that surgeons who didn't sound sympathetic in conversations with patients were sued five times more often than those who did.

Say 'we' and 'you'

It feels more personal and friendly than talking about 'the NMC' or 'registrants'.

Use contractions

Like 'can't' instead of 'cannot', or 'we'll' instead of 'we will'.

Studies show that contractions help people understand. And too much 'should not', 'do not' etc can sound old-fashioned and distant.

Even the government website, www.gov.uk, uses them. So we can and should use them too. Just don't overdo it, especially if you're writing a formal letter or document. There's a list of contractions we do and don't use in our style guide.

Avoid old-fashioned words and legalese

Take a look at the words on the left. They're cold and formal, and make life harder for readers - particularly if they aren't fluent in English. Use the more everyday alternatives on the right instead:

notify	tell
inform	tell
request	ask
remain	stay
whilst	while
consider	think
conduct	do
undertake	do
require	need

Use verbs, not nouns

Formal, legal writing uses a lot of nouns. But verbs are easier to understand. So avoid 'the management of' when you could say 'managing'. Or 'following registration' when 'after you register' is clearer.

Say sorry sincerely

Avoid phrases like, 'We would like to apologise' and 'we apologise if' - they can sound like a non-apology. 'We're sorry' is more genuine.

But only apologise if it's our fault - you don't have to say sorry for things that are beyond our control (like the law, for example).

Ambitious

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We take pride in our work. We're open to new ways of working and always do our best for the professionals on our register, the public we serve and each other.

So we write in a confident way that's clear about what we do and why we do it.

Don't hedge

'Hedging' is when you water down a statement.

There's a reason our narrative says this:

> We promote high professional standards...

Rather than this:

> We are committed to promoting high professional standards...

In the second version, 'committed to' is a hedge. Ironically, it actually sounds less committed than the first version.

Other hedges to watch out for are 'could', 'might', 'try to', 'endeavour to', 'plan to'. Of course, sometimes you might need to use them (we just used 'might' there), but if it's possible to be more forthright then always do.

Collaborative

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We value our relationships (both in and outside the NMC) and recognise that we're at our best when we work well with others.

Communication is so important to working well with people. Good writing makes life easy for readers and helps us connect with them. This means we can build lasting relationships with our colleagues and the people we serve.

Be fair, kind and ambitious

Follow all the principles above to connect with people in a meaningful way. Fair, kind and ambitious writing will help you collaborate with others.

Work well with colleagues

Working well with others includes people inside the NMC, as well as outside. Think about which colleagues might need to be included in the writing process to help you get the facts right. Also ask colleagues for help if they're more confident about writing in our tone of voice, and offer help to colleagues who are less confident.

Remember we're at our best when we support each other.

Get to the point

Make life easier for your reader. Put your main point first -- in the first sentence or two.

If you're not sure what it is, ask yourself:

Your main point will be either the 'know' or the 'do'; put that at the start.

Then use the 'feel' bit to help you decide how best to frame it.

Use subheadings and bullet points

Big blocks of text are off-putting. Subheadings and bullets help you break them up, making them easier to read and understand.

Use subheadings to summarise what comes next. So 'Three things you need to know before you register' rather than just 'Registration'.

Keep bullet points short (no more than a sentence) - otherwise they're just paragraphs with dots next to them. And try not to have more than five in a single list.