

Plain English

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0. Introduction

- Purpose:
 - help you to write better (clearer!) English;
 - provide an introduction to an excellent handbook: *'Oxford Guide to Plain English'*, by Martin Cutts (the OGPE).
- Need:
 - as a PhD supervisor (and an adviser to many BSc and MSc students) I have repeatedly met the same problems with students' English.

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Caveats

- These comments are aimed at the writing of reports, papers, theses, and business letters, where communication of ideas and facts is everything.
- Writing novels, plays, poetry is another thing entirely, and some of the points made here may not apply.

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Structure

- Idea of this presentation is to work through most of the OGPE.
- Main points will be summarised.
- Examples will be given, taken from RHUL students, the OGPE, and from my own work.
- This talk is not a substitute for reading the OGPE yourself, and any other guidance on writing English you can find.

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An important point

- No-one is perfect, least of all the presenter.
- Some of the issues raised are matters of taste; however, almost everyone would agree on the desirability of keeping things as clear and simple as possible.
- The primary goal of technical writing is to communicate ideas, and this is best achieved by writing in a comprehensible way!

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1. Write shorter sentences

- Guideline:** Over the whole document, make the average sentence length 15-20 words.
- Long sentences are hard work for the reader.
 - Usually, a long sentence will contain lots of different points, and the reader may miss some, or misunderstand what is being said.
 - Write simple sentences which make just one main point (perhaps with one subsidiary point).

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Example

- Here is one from OGPE:
Our annual bill for services (which unfortunately from your viewpoint has to increase to some degree in line with the rapid expansion of your business activities) in preparing the accounts and dealing with tax (please note there will be higher-rate tax assessments for us to deal with on this level of profit, which is the most advantageous time to invest in your personal pension fund, unless of course changes are made in the Chancellor's Budget Statement) and general matters arising, is enclosed herewith for your kind attention.
- This is certainly not easy to understand.
- It tries to make far too many points in one sentence.
- It probably resulted from the writer adding things as they occurred to him/her.

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Advice

- Sometimes it is absolutely necessary to write a long sentence.
- However, if you do write a long sentence, make sure you cannot reduce its length, e.g. using one of the approaches described in the OGPE.
- Try to keep the *average* around 15-20 words.
- Sentences should not all be very short, although this is less often a problem in practice!

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Fixes: *Split and disconnect*

- Find a natural break and cut the sentence there.
- E.g. (from student work):
Joshi et al. present a comparative assessment of existing security models supporting Web-based applications and workflow systems, and they claim that existing access models neither facilitate dynamic changes in the content and context of information, nor allow monitoring of the system's state.
can become:
Joshi et al. present a comparative assessment of existing security models supporting Web-based applications and workflow systems. They claim that existing access models neither facilitate dynamic changes in the content and context of information, nor allow monitoring of the system's state.

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Fixes: *Split and connect*

- Split the sentence and start again with a connecting word such as 'However', 'But', 'So', ...
- Another student work example:
While robust watermarks resist common image-manipulation procedures and are useful for ownership assertion purposes, robust digital watermarking is still a very difficult problem due to the numerous kinds of image manipulations a robust watermark has to be able to survive.
can become:
Robust watermarks resist common image-manipulation procedures and are useful for ownership assertion purposes. However, robust digital watermarking is still a very difficult problem due to the numerous kinds of image manipulations a robust watermark has to be able to survive.

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Fixes: *Say less*

- It is sometimes simple to reduce sentence length simply by removing unnecessary repetition.

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Fixes: *Use a list*

- Vertical lists (numbered or bulleted lists) break long sentences into manageable chunks.
- An example from OGPE:
The attachment of the warmer support-bearing assembly system must be checked to ensure that it is adequately lubricated, its securing screws are tight and that the warmer head can be easily repositioned without the support bearing sticking.
can become:
You must check the attachment of the warmer support-bearing assembly system to ensure that:
 - a) it is adequately lubricated;
 - b) its security screws are tight;
 - c) the warmer head can be easily repositioned without the support bearing sticking.

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Fixes: *Cut verbiage*

- Get rid of unnecessary words.
- From OGPE:

The organisers of the event should try to achieve greater safety **both from the point of view of** ensuring that the bonfire **itself** does not contain any **unacceptably** dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or **discarded** foam furniture and **from the point of view of** ensuring the letting-off of fireworks ...

becomes

The organisers of the event should try to achieve greater safety **by** ensuring that the bonfire does not contain any dangerous materials such as aerosol cans or foam furniture and **by** ensuring the letting-off of fireworks ...

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Fixes: *Start again!*

- Sometimes the sentence is such a mess that the only thing one can do is start again.
- That is write new text which tries to capture the original intention.
- There is a wonderful example of this in the OGPE – the OGPE is full of nice examples, all of which are ‘real’.

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2. Prefer plain words

Guideline: Use words your readers are likely to understand.

- Avoid using unnecessarily obscure words.
- Of course, sometimes it is necessary to use a long or unusual word to capture the precise intended meaning.

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Fixes: *Use simpler alternatives*

- An example from the OGPE about hospital car parking:

If my proposals are accepted, the income from fees would ensure that car parking **control could be effected** without **utilising monies** that should be **expended** on health care.

becomes:

If my proposals are accepted, the income from fees would ensure that car parking **could be controlled** without **using money** that should be **spent** on health care.

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Fixes: *Reconstruct the sentences*

- Spot the unusual word or phrase and use its meaning to aid in revising the sentence.
- From OGPE:

The ready availability of computer-based tutorials associated with applications software has become prevalent since the development of Microsoft Windows.

becomes (after spotting that ‘ready availability’ and ‘prevalent’ have similar meanings):

Computer-based tutorials associated with applications software have become readily available since the development of Microsoft Windows.

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A plain English lexicon

- The OGPE provides (pages 38-42) a handy list of plainer alternatives to official sounding terms.
- E.g.:
 - ‘due to the fact that’ becomes ‘as’ or ‘because’;
 - ‘if this is not the case’ becomes ‘if not’;
 - ‘in view of the fact that’ becomes ‘as’ or ‘because’;
 - and so on ...

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3. Write 'tight' English

Guideline: Use only as many words as you really need.

- Writing is full of 'flab'!
- Part of writing well is *writing tight*, ruthlessly cutting unnecessary words.
- Making your reader work through unnecessary text is not helpful, to you or the reader.
- Of course, this does not mean missing out necessary points.

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Fixes: *Strike out useless words*

- Example (from OGPE):
The cheque that was received from Classic Assurance was received on 13 January.
- 'Received' occurs twice, so we could simply delete 'that was received' to get:
The cheque from Classic Assurance was received on 13 January.
or even:
The cheque from Classic Assurance arrived on 13 January.

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Recognising active-voice

- Putting the 'doer', the person or thing doing the action, before the verb will *usually* ensure the verb is active.
- Some examples of active verbs:
 - I **walked** up the stairs.
 - She **hates** going to work.
 - I **will eat** some chocolate.
- In speech we usually favour active verbs.

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A general approach

- Write a first draft, and then come back later and revise it.
- Then revise it again, and again ...

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4. Favour the active voice

Guideline: Prefer the active voice unless there's a good reason for using the passive.

- This sentence has an active-voice verb:
Fred is demolishing the building.
- This sentence has a passive-voice verb:
The building is being demolished by Fred.
- In most cases, the first is to be preferred – it is shorter, snappier, and easier to read and understand.

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Recognising passive-voice

- Putting the 'doer', the person or thing doing the action, after the verb will *usually* mean the verb is passive.
- Some examples of passive verbs:
 - Three mistakes **were admitted** by the director.
 - Coastal towns **are being damaged** by storms.
- It is easy to convert these two examples to active-voice:
 - The director **admitted** three mistakes.
 - Storms **are damaging** coastal towns.
- It is not always so easy – sometimes the doer is not obvious in the passive-voice, e.g.
 - Coastal towns are being damaged.

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Why convert passives to actives?

- Verbs provide a lot of useful information, so it is good to get them down early in a sentence (more likely in active-voice).
- It can reduce the length of sentences.
- Readers prefer them!

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Use of the first person

- We are trained to avoid the first person singular ('I' and 'me') in papers and theses.
- The OGPE recommends changing this convention, simply for the sake of ease of reading since it allows the active-voice.
- I would not recommend it, though – it is too much of a shock for many referees (me included).
- A simple compromise is to use the first person plural ('we', 'us', 'our', etc.), even if there is only a single author.

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Passives can be useful!

- Passives are not always bad.
- Sometimes the doer is not clear, and the passive-voice does not require a doer.
- Sometimes it is desirable to omit mention of the doer, for whatever reason (e.g. 'your file has been lost').
- It enables emphasis to be put on the object of the verb (i.e. the recipient of the action).

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5. Use vigorous verbs

Guideline: Use clear, crisp, lively verbs to express the actions in your document.

- Good verbs give your writing power.
- Avoid what the OGPE calls 'smothered verbs' where you can.

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Examples

- The sentence:
I have now had sight of your letter to Mr Jones.
would be better as:
I have now seen your letter to Mr Jones.
- The sentence:
The original intention of the researchers was to discover the state of the equipment.
would be better as:
Originally, the researchers intended to discover the state of the equipment.
or:
The researchers originally intended to discover the state of the equipment.

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6. Use vertical lists

Guideline: Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.

- Bulleted or numbered lists are great ways to present complex information in a manageable way.
- Usually some lead in text is needed before the list.
- However, it is easy to get things wrong, including:
 - inconsistent wordings of list items;
 - punctuation problems.

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Consistent wording I

- The items in a list should all be worded in the same way, so that they all fit the lead in text.
- A bad example:
To restrict your salt intake **you should**:
 - not add salt at the table;
 - use only a little salt in cooking;
 - **do not use** bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking;
 - avoid salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts and olives.
- ‘you should do not use ...’ doesn’t make sense.

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Consistent wording II

- Instead we should have:
To restrict your salt intake **you should**:
 - not add salt at the table;
 - use only a little salt in cooking;
 - **not use** bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking;
 - avoid salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts and olives.
- However, this still has a mixture of positives and negatives.

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Consistent wording III

- This can be fixed as follows:
To restrict your salt intake you should use only a little salt in cooking, and you should not:
 - add salt at the table;
 - use bicarbonate of soda or baking powder in cooking;
 - eat salty food like tinned fish, roasted peanuts and olives.
- Often a vertical list is easier to read if each item has a similar grammatical structure.

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Punctuation

- The punctuation should also be consistent across the list.
- That is, every item should start with the same case of letter, and should end with the same punctuation mark (except, perhaps, the last item).
- OGPE suggests either:
 - starting with lower case and ending with a semicolon (if the items are not sentences), as in this list; or
 - starting with upper case and ending with a full stop.
- Only number the items if they have an inherent order or if you wish to refer to items later.

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7. Express things positively

Guideline: Put your points positively when you can.

- Writing things using lots of negatives can be very confusing.
- For example, even the apparently simple:
Vote for not more than one candidate.
would be much clearer as:
Vote for one candidate only.

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8. Be careful with cross-references

Guideline: Reduce cross-references to an minimum.

- In any complex document some cross-references are inevitable – but they should be kept to a minimum.
- In a large document like a thesis, cross-references are often necessary to remind the reader where an idea was first introduced, but don’t keep repeating the point.

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9. Avoid sexist language

Guideline: Try to avoid sexist usage.

- Use sex-neutral terms.
- Avoid he, his, him – and equally avoid she, hers or her – unless you are specifically referring to a male or female.

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Fixes: *Using titles or 'her or she'*

- The personal pronoun can be avoided by using a descriptive term for the entity concerned.

- For example, instead of:

The sender of a message uses her secret key to encrypt it.

one could write:

The sender of a message uses the sender's secret key to encrypt it.

or:

The sender of a message uses his or her secret key to encrypt it.

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Fixes: *Using the plural*

- Another approach is to use the plural form 'their'.
- It is becoming increasingly common for 'their' to be used as a synonym for 'his or her'.
- Strictly it is incorrect (since 'their' is plural not singular), but it works well, and has been in use for centuries (Shakespeare used it).
- However, some people don't like it, so be careful.

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10. Start and end well

Guideline: In letters, avoid fusty first sentences and formula finishes.

- OGPE has lots of examples.
- However, since this talk is not primarily about letter writing, I won't discuss this issue further.

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11. Use of punctuation

Guideline: Put accurate punctuation at the heart of your writing.

- Getting punctuation right is important.
- Bad punctuation can make nonsense of otherwise well-written text.
- Perhaps the most famous example of bad punctuation is in the title of a recent bestseller 'Eats, shoots and leaves'.

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Full stops

- Full stops (periods in the US) mark the end of sentences.
- Probably the most common punctuation.
- Can also be used to indicate abbreviations – however, this is generally optional.
- There is certainly no need to include full stops in acronyms (R.S.A. looks awfully fussy) or after Mr, Mrs, Dr, etc.

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Commas I

- Single commas separate parts of a sentence.
- For example:

When a new protocol is needed in a particular environment, the designer must first discover what mechanisms are available.
- Be sparing with commas – using them every few words may prevent the reader understanding the sentence.

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Commas II

- Pairs of commas cordon off information that is an aside, explanation or addition.
- In such a case, the sentence should make sense without the text between commas (check this!).
- E.g.

Holmes, having searched for further clues, left by the back door.

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Commas III

- Be careful with pairs of commas, as they can change the meaning.
- E.g.

The girls, who will join the team next week, are fine players for their age.

and

The girls who will join the team next week, are fine players for their age.

have different meanings.

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Commas IV

- Commas are used to separate items in a list, e.g.:

Staple foods include rice, wheat, sorghum, and millet.
- The comma after 'sorghum' is optional (the so called Oxford comma) – however, if the items in the list are each phrases (especially if some of them include 'and') then the final comma is very helpful.

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Colons

- A colon can be used to introduce direct speech (as an alternative to a comma).
- It can also be used to separate a main heading from a subtitle, e.g. 'Royal Holloway: The home of Information Security'.
- Another use is to introduce a vertical list or a running text list (e.g. 'he had three kinds of fruit: apples, pears and bananas').

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Semicolons I

- Consider this sentence (taken from the abstract of my PhD thesis):

Using results obtained for point divisions of 1-designs, we go on to establish new results for GD designs, in particular we derive information about the duals of GD designs.
- The second comma is wrong and should be a semicolon or a full stop.

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Semicolons II

- When using semicolons (apart from when they are used in lists):
 - the statements separated by a semicolon could stand alone as separate sentences.
 - the topics mentioned in the statements are closely related.
- Semicolons can also be used instead of commas to separate the items in a list, particularly if each item is complex (and perhaps contains a comma).

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Another bad example

- The following is also taken from my thesis (section 1.1):

If x, y are two blocks we will often write $|x \cap y|$ for the intersection number of x and y ; (again considering x and y as point sets).
- This is incorrect – the statement following the semicolon is not a sentence, since it does not have an active verb.
- A comma would be appropriate instead (or even nothing at all).

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Dashes

- Dashes are sometimes used singly at the start of an aside, explanation or addition.
- A pair of dashes can be used to draw special attention to a phrase.
- Avoid overusing them!
- Most importantly, use the right LaTeX dash for the right purpose ('-' for hyphens, '--' for numeric ranges, and '---' for dashes in sentences).

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Brackets

- These can be used to surround an aside, explanation or addition that it relatively unimportant.
- If a sentence starts inside brackets, then it should end inside the brackets, with the full stop inside.
- Comma always go after brackets.
- If you use an acronym, spell it out in full the first time and put the acronym in brackets, e.g. 'Information Security Group (ISG)'.

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Capitals

- Use capital letters sparingly and consistently.
- When in doubt use lower case.
- Even in headings, titles look a little unnecessary, especially for minor headings.

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Hyphens

- Hyphens link things.
- They link words forming an adjective before a noun, e.g. threshold-based cryptosystem, public-key cryptography. [Note that, in the latter case, the noun 'public key' does not have a hyphen.]

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Apostrophes I

- There are two uses for apostrophes:
 - possession; and
 - contraction.
- Find the possessor, and put the apostrophe immediately after the possessor.
- E.g.:
 - The people's leader ignored the children's opinions.
 - The three inspectors' cars were daubed.
 - I sent you Mr Jones's copy of the lease yesterday.
 - I sent you Mr Jones' copy of the lease yesterday.

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Apostrophes II

- An apostrophe can be used to indicate one or missing letters.
- E.g.:
 - Today's the day [Today is ...].
 - It's no concern of mine [It is ...].
 - Three o'clock [... of the clock].
- Don't use an apostrophe for a plural, e.g. 1990s (and not 1990's), four carrots (and not carrot's).

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Ellipsis

- The main use of an ellipsis (three dots, i.e. ...) is to indicate missing text.
- Note that it must have three dots.

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Quotation marks

- Quote marks are used for reporting speech or a quote, or to surround a word that is unusual in some way.
- In the UK, single quote marks ('...') are the norm, except if you have two levels of quotes.
- If you quote a full sentence then the full stop goes before the quote mark.
- If you quote part of a sentence, then the full stop goes after the quote mark.

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12. Some other points

- Briefly review other topics covered in the OGPE.
- There is a lot more in the OGPE than I have covered in this talk, both on the topics I have mentioned and on other topics.
- Also mention some of my big hates!

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Planning

- Plan before you write! [See chapter 14 of OGPE].
- I'm sure future speakers will discuss this.
- However, you need to develop a planning technique which suits you.
- I like to write a document from the 'top down', i.e. start with a list of headings and gradually fill the document out.
- Of course, no plan should be too rigid.

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Misuse of the word ‘different’

- The word different should not be used as a synonym for ‘a multiplicity of’ or ‘a variety of’.
- For example, ‘I like different foods’ should be ‘I like a variety of foods’, unless you mean that the foods that you like are different from something else.
- Also, sometimes the word is completely redundant, e.g. ‘He has three different children’ means exactly the same as ‘He has three children’, since all children are different!

Mass nouns

- Mass nouns (like ‘air’ ‘water’, ‘food’) do not take a plural form, typically because they are continuous rather than discrete in nature.
- Three nouns which seem to cause particular problems are:
 - evidence;
 - software;
 - notation.
- In most English usage, these are mass nouns.

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Some common mistakes

- The word ‘criteria’ is plural – the singular is ‘criterion’.
- “it’s” is an abbreviation of ‘it is’ – the possessive form of ‘it’ does not have an apostrophe – it is simply ‘its’.

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Rambling abstracts

- An abstract (of a thesis or paper) should be a concise description of the new results.
- An abstract for a paper should normally be one paragraph long.
- An abstract is not an introduction – an abstract is not the place to provide lots of background information.

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No surprises please!

- Writing a paper or thesis is a very different thing to writing a novel.
- In a novel, unexpected plot developments can delight and entertain the reader.
- In a paper, unexpected developments in the narrative are generally unwelcome.
- Make sure you tell the reader what is coming, and also summarise what you have said [this is why theorem-proof is such a nice model].
- If nothing else, the 99% of readers who only read the abstract may get an idea of what you have done!
- It also gives the reader an incentive to read the paper, because he/she will know what is coming.

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Short titles please

- A title does not have to be a full sentence.
- Also, it does not have to provide a description of everything in the paper, just the main focus.
- The same is true for internal headings and captions for tables and figures.
- The best titles are short and attention-grabbing (and accurate, of course).
- So, for example, ‘Breaking RSA’ has to be better than ‘A new method for breaking RSA’.

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Use of figures

- Pictures can be enormously helpful.
- However, they should be used selectively and they should have appropriate complexity.
- Over-complex figures can be almost useless.
- Also, pictures do not do away with the need for proper explanatory text – pictures illustrate ideas you must explain properly using words.

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References

- Quote references properly and in full.
- Check references!
- Sadly, the vast majority of papers published in conference proceedings have sloppily produced reference lists.
- This reflects badly on the authors, who clearly don't respect those whose work they are building upon.

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