Writing to residents

v.2.

This training

Will cover three separate sections:

- Writing clearly

- Persuading readers

- Rewriting your own communications

The training will take around 2½ hours

Why write more clearly

- Better response rates (often a significant difference)

- Less confusion and time wasted for residents

- Less unnecessary contact

- Low/no cost way to improve our services

When we improve our communications we are expecting improvements but not 100% compliance. For example rewriting our Council Tax reminders led to a jump from 64% payment to 71%, a difference worth tens of thousands of pounds and a lot of officer time, easily worth the time taken to change the letters.

Track changes tool

Select "Review"
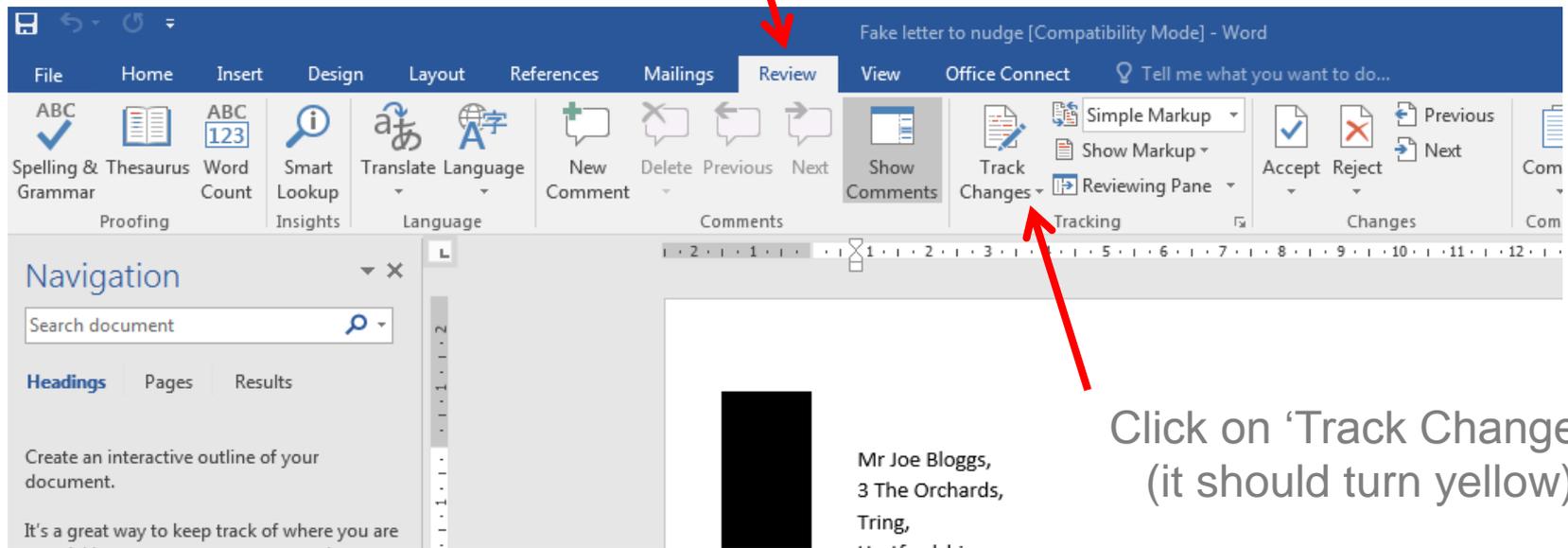
Click on 'Track Changes'
(it should turn yellow)

Writing clearly

"If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter"

- Blaise Pascal (paraphrased)

Have a go...

Take the example letter and try to make it as clear as possible.

Make sure 'Track Changes' is working.

- Remove unnecessary legislation (consider including it as an appendix if there is a legal requirement)
- Cut out unnecessary stories about our process or structure
- Rewrite passive sentences
- Use shorter words and sentences where possible

A good letter gets to the point, writing a short and effective letter takes more skill than writing a long and messy one.

Writing concisely – Fleisch-Kincaid grade tool

This tool is available in Microsoft Word, and will tell you how readable your writing is, giving you an approximation of the American school year needed to read it. Aim for below 10.0 if possible, this is what an average 15-16 year old could read.

Select "File"

Then select "Options"

Check the box for "Show readability statistics"
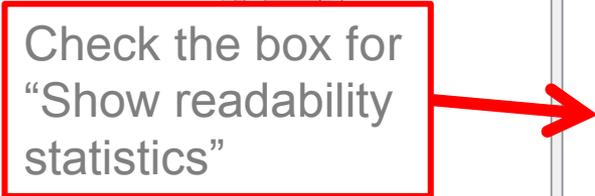
Readability Statistics

Counts

Words	295
Characters	1501
Paragraphs	29
Sentences	8

Averages

Sentences per Paragraph	1.6
Words per Sentence	25.2
Characters per Word	4.7

Readability

Passive Sentences	37%
Flesch Reading Ease	37.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	14.2

- Run Spelling & Grammar check by pressing F7. Once the check has finished you will see the screen on the left.

- **Passive Sentences.** Try to get this as low as possible by focussing on the 'actor' e.g. "He washes the car" instead of "The car is washed by him"

- **Flesch Reading Ease.** We won't use this measure.

- **Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.** The grade in the American school system that someone would need to be at to understand your letter. Aim for 10.0 or below. Short words and short sentences give you a better score.

- Improve and repeat until you make it readable enough for your audience!

Writing for non-experts

- Remove jargon and acronyms

- Remove any "legalese" – language which sounds legal but is not from legislation

- Put yourself in the shoes of the resident, with no knowledge of how the system works

Any letter written to residents should make complete sense to them, if they don't understand it's not surprising that they don't pay attention to our letters.

Making it clear what residents need to do

- Put what you are asking for as early as possible in the letter

- Make it clear how residents should do this, and when they should do it by

- If there are consequences to the reader not doing what you ask then say so

Have a go…

Take the example letter and try to make it as clear as possible. Use 'Track Changes'.

- Remove jargon and acronyms
- Remove legal sounding language
- Put what you're asking for as early as possible
- Make it clear what the resident needs to do, how, and when
- Try to get your Fleisch-Kincaid level down to 10.0 or below

Persuading readers

"The first misconception is that it is possible to avoid influencing people's choices"

- Richard Thaler, Nudge

Persuading readers

- The way we write has a big impact on results, whether we write well or shoot ourselves in the foot by confusing residents

- Using 'Nudge' techniques we can improve response rates at no cost and without fundamentally changing incentives

- This does not mean lying or manipulating readers, just presenting information in the right way. In general we are helping them to do things that they mean to already.

"The science of persuasion"

- Techniques which help us to influence residents, which are frequently used by advertisers

- Using the science of behavioural economics

- Most of these techniques can be replicated to some extent in how we write

- Also useful is the EAST Framework from the Cabinet Office (Easy, Attractive, Timely, Social)

[YouTube video, The Science of Persuasion, credit Influence at Work](#)

How could we apply the principles of…

- **Reciprocity** – giving back to people who have helped us

- **Scarcity** – valuing things which are rare

- **Authority** – obeying (recommended) experts

- **Consistency** – staying true to past commitments and actions

- **Liking** – working better with those that you have something in common with, or who have complimented you previously

- **Consensus** – doing what you think the majority of people are doing

Rewriting our own letters

"If you want to know about water, don't ask a fish"

- Chinese proverb