

# Action for Children writing guide

Action for Children is a charity that has been working with the UK's most vulnerable and neglected children since 1869. We were originally called The Children's Home (later becoming the National Children's Home, or NCH), and in September 2008 we changed our name to one that better describes what we do and what we value – Action for Children.

From day one, we have applied the very highest standards to all our work, and this has led us to achieve consistently sector-leading results for the young people and families we work with.

Above everything, we are a practical organisation, so as well as explaining the vision and values behind our success, this document provides a very practical writing guide to help you communicate about our work.

As well as the general rules on punctuation and grammar that you will find later in the document, always remember that if you write sensitively, simply and honestly, you'll be right on brand! If in doubt, ask yourself whether a secondary school child could understand what you are writing.

This guide applies to both internal and external writing.

## Some key messages

### What we do

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

### For publications for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland:

As above, but replace 'Action for Children' with Action for Children-Gweithredu dros Blant/Action for Children Scotland/Action for Children Northern Ireland as appropriate, and replace 'the UK' with Wales/Scotland/Northern Ireland as appropriate.

## Our values

**Passion** – we are driven by our desire to help children and young people overcome injustice and disadvantage

**Equality** – we believe all children and young people have equal worth and equal rights

**Hope** – we believe in a child or young person's potential, no matter what they have experienced or what they have done

## **Our purpose**

Always to be there for the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people, helping them break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

## **Our vision**

Our vision is of a world where all children and young people have a sense of belonging, and are loved and valued, a world where they can fulfil their potential, shape their destiny and experience the joy of life.

## **Our operational mission**

Action for Children meets the needs of the children and young people who most need support to achieve their full potential. Through our work and through speaking out, we seek to break the cycle of deprivation. We challenge injustice and empower children to overcome the obstacles in their lives that hold them back. We tailor our work to local circumstances, in partnership with children and young people, families, communities and local organisations.

# **Writing in the Action for Children brand**

## **Before you start**

Before you begin writing, you should think about:

### **1. Who is this for?**

Pinpoint your audience. Action for Children has many different audiences – service users (many of whom are children), statutory funders, supporters, policy makers, the general public and our own workforce. Your audience should not be 'everyone'. If you try and reach everyone, you are in danger of not reaching anyone.

Think about your intended audience's prior knowledge of Action for Children and the topics you are writing about. Someone with no knowledge of Action for Children or our work will need you to give them different information from someone who is a long-term supporter or a social care professional.

### **2. What is it for?**

Once you know who your audience is, then focus on what they need to know. Why are you writing for them? What is your objective? What do you want them to know or do after reading your text? You might be simply giving them information, or trying to persuade them to enter into a contract or partnership with Action for Children. You might be asking them for money. You might be encouraging them to visit our website or to get in touch with us to find out more.

The more precisely you pinpoint your audience and objective, the easier it will be to write effective text. Remember that your text should always be as clear, simple and short as possible.

# It's there in the name

There are two key parts to our writing style, and you can see these in our name.

## 1. Action for...

Everything we do is meant to help children be in charge of their own lives. It is action *for* them, so when we're writing, we must always think about their point of view.

## 2 ...Children

Everything we write must be simple enough for a secondary school child to understand.

# Writing from the child's point of view

## 1. Be sensitive

The children we work with often have very difficult lives. So when you're writing about them, you will often have to talk about very difficult subjects. These could be anything from sexual abuse to physical disabilities. Because of this, you must always write in a way that respects them – a good test is to think, 'how would I feel if someone was talking about me like that?'

## Example

**Wrong:** Damaged children and teenagers who, like Adil, have been beaten, rejected and sexually abused, need a great deal of specialist help and support. Without our help, they will never heal from their horrific experiences and their whole lives will be ruined.

**Right:** Children and teenagers who, like Adil, have suffered violence, rejection and abuse, need specialist help. Without it, the emotional scars of their experiences can last for many years after the physical marks have healed.

## 2. Be real

If you're writing from the children's point of view, then it's common sense to use their real stories and their own words. Just remember that you must always have their written permission and they must fully understand how you intend to use their story.

This lets you write in a way that can be much more emotional for the reader, especially if you use real quotations.

For example, quoting Lucy as saying 'I felt so alone and afraid. I just wanted to curl up and die' is very sad. But saying 'Lucy felt so alone and afraid that she just wanted to curl up and die' is not as strong and sounds fake.

## Example

Chandra is not her real name but this is her real story: 'When I was a baby my mum and dad split up and I went to live with my mum. Things were OK till she got a new boyfriend and one night she went out and left us on our own together. I was six years old when he raped me. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't think they'd believe me, but I begged to go and live with my dad instead. At Dad's, the beatings started right away. He used to beat me almost every day, punching me and whipping me with the buckled end of his belt. Then one day...'

### 3. Be hopeful

Show the need, and the tough situation, but also show how it can be made better with our support. Remember, we're called **Action** for Children, so never show children as hopeless. Sometimes the situations seem hopeless, but the children never are.

Also, be aware that the solution has not always happened yet, but we believe in the resilience of children and young people and their ability to recover – especially with specialist help. If you show both the need and the solution, then the whole story is not hopeless.

## Examples

This poem is by 17-year-old Nicola, whose family were violent towards her throughout her childhood. She ran away from home to London when she was just 13. Action for Children has now helped Nicola to find a home of her own. These are Nicola's words...

Just a few years ago Russell's life was spiralling out of control as he struggled to come to terms with a deeply painful past. Action for Children has helped Russell to find his way back from the brink...

### 4. Be supportive

Action for Children should be seen as an enabling force – a sort of catalyst through which children reach their full potential. Generally speaking, we help children learn to do things for themselves, rather than doing things for them. We don't provide outcomes, we provide opportunities, so never portray our service users as passive and helpless.

## Examples

**Wrong:** Action for Children has given Kelly a happier future.

**Right:** Action for Children is helping Kelly to build a happier future.

**Wrong:** Thanks to your support, Action for Children has transformed Ella's life over the past year.

**Right:** Thank you for buying Action for Children and Ella the time to transform her life, together.

**Wrong:** Action for Children has taken Orin's pain away.

**Right:** With Action for Children's support, Orin has been able to put his painful past behind him.

**Wrong:** You can give Nicky the childhood she deserves.

**Right:** You can help Nicky have the childhood she deserves.

## 5. Be precise

Never make sweeping statements or generalisations. If you have been talking about one particular child, don't assume that their experience or feelings are shared by all children in similar situations. You can usually get round this by using words like 'many', 'some', 'can often' etc. Beware of sentences that start 'They feel/they find...' – this is often the start of a sweeping generalisation.

## Examples

**Wrong:** It is hard to understand autistic children. They find life very scary and confusing.

**Right:** It can be hard to understand autistic children. They can often find life very scary and confusing.

**Wrong:** Children in care are growing up without the love, security and stability that only a family can bring.

**Right:** Many children in care don't have the security of a stable, supportive family.

## 6. Be active

We're an organisation that is dedicated to transforming the lives of the most vulnerable children in the UK and beyond, so we want to see change.

Use language that is active, and that encourages people to get involved, to find out more, to donate.

Remember, we're called **Action** for Children.

## 7. Be distinctive

Remember, Action for Children is here to make a difference, and you can reflect that by writing in a way that's different to the other children's charities. Our core values are passion, equality and hope, so write with passion, because you believe every child deserves a good childhood, and aim to fill your readers with hope. One simple way to begin is to choose emotive and descriptive words that are less commonly used by other organisations. Some examples we might think about using include:

### To do with the need

Traumatising  
Sickening  
Monstrous  
Distressing  
Horrendous  
Devastating  
Terrifying  
Exploited

### To do with the solution

Cherish  
Hug  
Patient  
Unending  
Gentle  
Loving  
Heal  
Champion

### **To do with the young person's or the audience's feelings**

Giggling	Uplifting
Vivacious	Heart-warming
Mischievous	Marvellous
Exuberant	Wonderful
Thoughtful	Inspiring
Brave	Heartfelt
Innocent	Passionate

Remember when using some of these emotive words that Action for Children works with a range of children and young people – sometimes with those who commit offences themselves. So never describe people as 'monstrous' or 'terrifying' but find other ways to describe the authenticity of a situation where the effect is 'monstrous' or the action is 'terrifying'.

This is not an exhaustive list, or a prescriptive one – it's just a starting point for looking at language that has a little more passion and personality to it.

### **8. Be truthful**

Don't make things up!

## **Language a child can understand**

Action for Children's audience includes a wide range of ages, levels of education and cultural backgrounds. The following rules are therefore designed to make our writing accessible to all these groups. Our rules conform to editorial convention and are in keeping with current research into accessibility.

### **1. Use plain English**

Everything we write must be easy to read and in plain English. This means using simple language and minimal punctuation. Substitute jargon and difficult words with simpler ones and keep sentences short. A good resource to refer to (including free guides) is the Plain English Campaign website: [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

'A multi-agency service catering for holistic diversionary provision to young people for positive action linked to the community safety strategy and the pupil referral unit.'

As this real-life prize-winning example of gobbledegook describing go-karting lessons shows, if it can't be understood, it doesn't work.

### **Real-life examples:**

#### **Before**

High-quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and enhancement of the ongoing learning process.

#### **After**

Children need good schools if they are to learn properly.

**Before**

If there are any points on which you require explanation or further particulars we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required by telephone.

**After**

If you have any questions, please ring.

**2. Choose the simpler word****Avoid**

afford an opportunity  
amongst  
as a consequence of  
cost base  
demonstrate  
determine  
ensure  
establish  
facilitate  
has the capability  
in accordance with  
in conjunction with  
initiate  
monies  
myself  
nevertheless  
nonetheless  
notwithstanding  
participate  
prior to  
regarding  
relating to  
stepchange  
supplementary  
utilise  
whilst  
with a view to  
with regard to  
within

**Use**

let, allow  
among  
because  
cost  
show  
decide  
make sure  
set up, create, form, find out  
help  
can  
in line with  
with  
start, begin  
money, amount of money  
me  
even so, however, yet  
even so, however, yet  
even if, despite, still, yet, but  
take part  
before  
about  
about  
change  
extra, more  
use  
while  
to  
about, concerning  
in

**3. No clichés and jargon**

Avoid clichés as these are generally irrelevant and can be substituted for a more precise word.

Avoid jargon unless it is appropriate for a specific audience. Where jargon, acronyms or abbreviations must be used, explain the term when it is first used in the text.

**4. No discriminatory language**

It is important to remember that Action for Children works with a diverse range of people and communities. We want to show that we value that diversity in all our writing. There are some simple rules that can help with this.

Do not use 'he' or 'his' where the gender of the person is unknown. Alternatives such as 'he/she', '(s)he', 's/he' can be clumsy – so rewrite the sentence if possible or use the plural 'they.'

**Before**

The child must decide for himself

**After**

The child must decide, *or* children must decide for themselves

Use gender inclusive language wherever possible (eg Chair, rather than Chairman or Chairwoman).

Action for Children also has preferred words and phrases to reflect race and disability, for example:

Disabled children (not children with disabilities)

Mixed-parentage child (not mixed-race or mixed-heritage)

Minority ethnic (not ethnic minority)

Birth family (not natural family)

## 5. Verbs

Use active rather than passive forms of verbs. Remember we're called Action for Children!

**Before**

A whole range of services is provided by the centre.

**After**

The centre provides a whole range of services.

Don't use nouns as verbs, eg incentivise (offer an incentive), workshop it (have a workshop), impacted (made an impact).

## 6. Abbreviations and contractions

Abbreviations are truncated forms of words and should have a full stop at the end (number – no.). Contractions are shortened forms of words that keep the final letter (Doctor – Dr). Avoid unnecessary abbreviations. Unfamiliar abbreviations should be explained the first time they occur in the text.

Do not use full stops with etc, eg, ie, am, pm.

Omit full stops after contracted forms.

- Mr, Ms, Ltd, Dr, Revd

**Never abbreviate Action for Children or use the initials AFC.**

## 7. Put statistics in context where possible

It's helpful to put statistics into context by providing a comparison, which can also create impact when talking about large numbers. For example – 'we help XX children and young people every day – that's the equivalent to the population of Cheltenham'.

But remember, be authentic – don't be tempted to make the statistics up. Someone might just ask you to prove where you got that statistic from!

## 8. Addresses

Leave out all punctuation from line ends in display addresses.

Place the postcode and city/county on the same line.

Never put a full stop after a website address.

Action for Children  
3 The Boulevard  
Ascot Road  
Watford WD18 8AG  
Telephone: 0300 123 2112  
[www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

## 9. Ages

Write one to nine in full, and 10 and above as numerals.

- Seven-year-old Karen
- Ruby is 12 years old
- Most of the 12 year olds
- 16- to 25-year-old visitors (use a hyphen in this instance)

## 10. Ampersands

Don't use ampersands except in references or unless they are a recognised part of a company name.

- Ernst & Young, Marks & Spencer
- Brown, J & Zakir, R (2002) *Children in care*, Department of Health

## 11. Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used to show possession (the boy's book, the children's mother) or to show part of the word is omitted (don't for do not, can't for cannot, they'll for they will). This is how to use its and it's:

- It's (it is): it's [it is] a common problem; it's [it is] mine
- Its (possessive): the bird hurt its wing; the council wants its logo in blue
- Singular: the apple's colour is lovely [one apple]; the boy's book is lost [one boy]

- Plural: the apples' colour is lovely [many apples]; The boys' books are lost [many boys]

Use apostrophes for phrases denoting time:

Two years' experience, 200 hours' community service, we will meet in one week's time.

## 12. Bullet points

Bullet points are short units of information, such as a list. Do not use punctuation between bullet points, or a full stop after the final point. Each bullet point should begin with lower case letters.

Children may be involved in:

- swimming
- skating
- arts and crafts
- games
- table tennis
- cooking

When a bullet point list includes a whole sentence or more than one sentence in each point, try to rewrite it as ordinary text. Otherwise, start each bullet point with a capital letter and put a full stop at the end. For example:

Action for Children's Net Smart rules:

- Never respond to nasty or suggestive messages. Always tell your parent or carer if you get such messages or if you see rude pictures while online and report them to your internet service provider.

## 13. Capitals

Capitals (upper-case letters) should be used sparingly. Do not use block capitals, especially in headings, as this is harder to read.

However, we always capitalise the A and the C in Action for Children.

Capitals don't indicate importance (the words themselves should convey meaning) and they are harder for people with reading difficulties to follow. Action for Children's style, therefore, is to use minimal capitals, in line with current research and editorial conventions.

If in doubt about whether to use upper or lower case, use lower case.

Action for Children Chair and Action for Children Council take upper case C to avoid confusion.

Job names take lower case, except where it is the person's title:

'Service Manager Barbara Wallis says...' but 'Barbara Wallis, the service manager, says...'

Action for Children initiatives and services take upper case: Art Matters, Larne Parental Support Service (but use lower case for home collecting boxes, street to store collections, house-to-house collections).

Proper titles of external organisations and initiatives should also take upper case: Sure Start, Children's Fund, Youth Justice Board, Department of Health, Dorset Health Authority, Oxfordshire County Council.

Take care when you talk about government. 'Government' with an upper case 'G' indicates the government of the day – ie the Liberal Democrat Government. A lower case 'g' indicates the government of a nation – all of its government structures.

#### **14. Dates**

Dates should be written without punctuation and without using 'st', 'nd', 'rd' or 'th'.

Follow these styles:

- Friday 3 October 2009
- 10–16 May
- 16 February 2009
- The course runs from 12 to 18 December
- The exhibition is on 12 and 13 June
- The financial year should be written 2008/09 and calendar years written 2008–09
- She was the 1996–97 president (not 1996–1997 or 1996–7)
- Income received during 2002/03 exceeded that of 2001/02

#### **15. Names, titles and forms of address**

Action for Children is always singular.

##### **Use**

Action for Children works with vulnerable children.

##### **Don't use**

Action for Children work with vulnerable children.

For brevity, use 'we' wherever possible, ie:

'We help the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.'

Avoid using titles such as Mr, Ms, Mrs etc. Use first names and surnames instead.

Follow these styles below:

- Mary Alexander, Sanjay Patel
- Dr Aliah Richards
- David Wilson MP
- The Rt Hon Nazan Arif
- HM Ambassador James Boateng

#### **16. Numbers and figures**

Numbers from one to nine should be spelt out; numbers from 10 and above should be in

figures, for example:

- Of 120 young people attending the service, only 17 reoffended.
- There will be five refugee services and 13 family centres opening next year.

Use words rather than figures if the sense is general, ie:

‘There are over a hundred services, helping thousands of service users.’

Never begin a sentence with figures; spell the number out or rewrite the sentence, for example:

- Thirty-two young people regularly use the service.
- Action for Children had a productive year in 2008 (not 2008 was a productive year for Action for Children)

For numbers consisting of three or more digits, a comma should be inserted, for example:

- 3,198
- 23,000
- 2,465,000

## **17. Percentages**

Write per cent in text, and use % in parentheses/brackets, tables, pull-out quotes and headings.

For example: The study showed 15 per cent of children at the service are Asian (10% come from Pakistan).

## **18. Quotation marks**

Use single quotation marks for speech.

- Jill said: ‘The service has made a real difference.’

Use double quotation marks for speech within single quotation marks.

- ‘The service has had a big impact on the young people. They often say things like “I’d recommend it to anyone, it’s great”,’ says the service manager.

Punctuation within quotation marks depends on whether a complete sentence is being quoted.

- Ali said: ‘I loved doing the artwork, it was hard at first but I’m really pleased now.’
- ‘I don’t mind helping my mum,’ says John, ‘but I’d like to see my friends more.’
- Being a young carer can be hard and Ria says she doesn’t always think people ‘get what it means’.

If a quotation exceeds one paragraph, don’t end the first paragraph with a quotation mark, but begin the next paragraph with one.

## **19. Telephone numbers**

Don’t use hyphens and brackets with telephone numbers.

Follow the styles below:

020 7704 7118  
01851 735082

Never use more than six digits in a unit; if there are more than six digits, break them up with a space.

Action for Children Customer Support details must be written as:

Customer Support: 0300 123 2112 (open 9am–5pm Monday to Friday)

## **20. Time**

Use am and pm rather than o'clock, without punctuation or spaces.

Follow the styles below:

- The shop opens at 9am.
- Registration will be 9am–11am.
- Coffee will be served 11am–1pm.
- The service will be open from 10am to 6pm daily.

## **21. Action for Children preferred spellings**

Action for Children's house style is to use British spellings rather than American spellings, and to use –ise rather than –ize spellings.

Examples include:

- organisation, realise, centralise, emphasise, summarise, surprise, exercise, supervise, enterprise
- adviser, not advisor – except for Ernst & Young, who use advisor
- amid (not amidst), among (not amongst), while (not whilst)
- childcare, healthcare
- email
- fundraiser, UK-wide
- no one (not no-one)
- Ofsted (not OFSTED)
- online
- Sure Start (not SureStart)
- website
- whistleblowing

As a general guide, we follow the Oxford style.

## **22. Preferred terminology**

The following is a list of current terminology agreed with experts at Action for Children, which may change with time. To check the preferred way of describing our service users, contact the design team.

<b>Say</b>	<b>Don't say</b>
service	project
children with learning difficulties	difficult children
disabled children	children with a disability
disadvantaged children/children who offend	troubled children/young offenders
emotional, behavioural and social difficulties	EBSD
mixed parentage	mixed race
service user	project user or customer

### **23. Four nations**

Action for Children is a UK-wide organisation. We have services in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

When referring to the UK, make sure this means England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

When referring to Great Britain, make sure this means England, Scotland and Wales only.

Always refer to:

- Action for Children-Gweithredu dros Blant – not Action for Children Wales or Action for Children Cymru
- Action for Children Scotland
- Action for Children Northern Ireland
- Action for Children – not Action for Children England

### **Our standard statement is:**

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

### **For publications for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland:**

As above, but replace 'Action for Children' with Action for Children-Gweithredu dros Blant/Action for Children Scotland/Action for Children Northern Ireland as appropriate, and replace 'the UK' with Wales/Scotland/Northern Ireland as appropriate.

### **24. Four nations terminology**

Local or national dialect words may be used if the meaning is clear from the context or if it will be understood by the primary audience, otherwise provide a translation when first used, for example: 'I went to the Action for Children service and got some skills and a CV and now it's good to be fettlin' [working].'

Avoid using phonetic spellings to reflect accent as this makes reading more difficult: 'They say tae ye look, ye can dae this, this way, ye'll breach it. An' they'll say ye'll breach yersel' by no turnin' up. It's no like they breach us.'

## **Scotland**

- The word 'depute' replaces 'deputy'.
- There are social work (rather than social services) departments in local councils.
- When referring to 'parliament' be clear if this is the UK Parliament or the Scottish Parliament.
- Youth offending is addressed through the children's hearings system rather than through the courts.

## **Wales**

- Best Value is called the Wales Programme for Improvement.
- Quality Protects is called Children First in Wales.
- Social services are called social care services.
- When referring to 'the government' be clear if this is the UK Government or the Welsh Assembly Government.
- The Sure Start/Children's Fund equivalent is called Cymorth.

## **25. Translation**

To ensure we are as accessible as possible, some publications are translated into Welsh and Scots Gallic, and into languages such as Punjabi and Urdu. Materials can also be produced in other formats such as Braille or large-print formats. Approved translators must be used so that the same high standards are applied across all Action for Children materials. For advice on translation and other formats, please contact the design team.