To write or not to write

Many of us churn out paper at an alarming rate. How often do we ask whether it is really necessary? Could you do the business over the phone or by e-mail?

Establish your purpose in writing

Before you write ask yourself why you are writing:

- Is it a request for information?
- Is it to pass on information?
- Is it put something on the record?
- Does it seek to persuade?

Structure your content logically

Your reader needs to understand clearly your purpose in writing and the information you are conveying:

- Plan before you write
- Include only what is relevant
- Order it logically
- Ensure a clear beginning, middle and end

Follow the basic principles of good communication

- Keep the sentences short and simple
- Use plain language
- Do not use bureaucratic or public service jargon
- Paragraphs should not be too long and the sentences must convey related thoughts
- Do not use language or long words to 'impress' your reader

Sentences

In these days of mass communication when people are bombarded with information, either sought or unsolicited, through a multiplicity of mass media, confusion is a possible or even probable outcome if the sentence does not make itself immediately clear. (If you see what we mean?)

In other words – avoid bombarding people with too much information. A sentence is more likely to succeed in getting the message across if it is short and contains one thought.

Words

Words may not mean the same thing to the reader as they do to you. Also the simpler the better, some people think using three words is better than one – not so. For example:

- The hospital has accommodation capacity for 500 inpatients = the hospital has 500 beds

Beware of using health system language when communicating with people who are unfamiliar with the health system:

- Activity – the number of people treated
- WTE – whole time equivalent refers to staffing levels

On the record

Written documents must stand the test of time. A researcher in 20 years should be able to pick up any letter, report or minutes and make sense of it. All written work should make sense in its own right. That does not mean that that you cannot refer to other documents but do make sure that cross referencing is clear.