Values into action: writing better responses to complaints

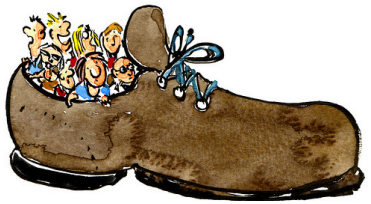
Caroline Bradley

1

Step into customer's shoes – be specific

When people complain, what are their

1. Feelings and attitude?
2. Hopes and expectations?



2



Your objectives?

What do you want to achieve? (and avoid?)

3

People who complain want to be:

1. Heard
2. Understood
3. Given the service they were after or a reasonable resolution



4

In general what percentage of unhappy customers complain?

4%



5

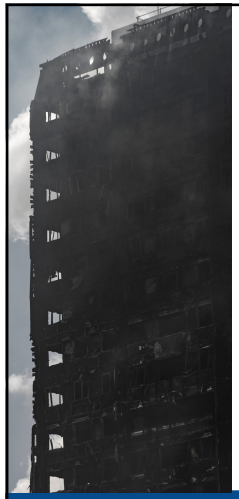
In an open market…

90%

Of unhappy customers will switch to a competitor



6



In the shadow of Grenfell…

The social housing green paper (2018) found complaints processes not working well for residents.

- Difficult to access, understand and navigate
- Unable to hold landlord to account

Ombudsman also found landlords lacking.

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The Complaint Handling Code



A reset
making complaint handling work well for everyone



A positive framework
supportive and clear

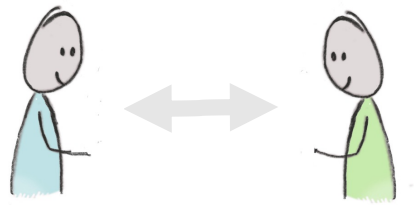


Focus on residents
because their voice is easily lost

8

Your task is to:

Create understanding
Rebuild trust



Customer You

9

This is a relationship

Be friendly, open and straightforward.

Be as human and helpful when you write as you would be on the phone or face-to-face.



10

Key findings:

- More than four out of five social housing customers said they **expect the same level of service** from their social housing provider as they do from other companies.
- Customers said they want – and should expect – that level of service **because they're paying for it.**
- Customers value **speed, ongoing updates, tracking** and **timeliness** when receiving a service from companies such as Royal Mail, Amazon or their bank. They also look fondly on good communication, friendliness and helpfulness.
- The majority of customers want the same from their social housing provider but would like it to be a two-way relationship, to be treated with **respect** and would like ongoing service delivery **communications** to be better.
- When customers consider great service, they often relate it to their home. Understandably, a **good, speedy repairs service** was seen as significant and the most important reason to class a service from a social housing provider as 'great'.
- The top ten qualities of a great service were: repairs, speed, maintenance, listening, communicating, problem solving, keeping promises, timeliness, customer service and being respectful.
- While there is some customer interaction with online services as standard, not all customers want to interact with social housing providers in this way. Many simply want face to face, human interaction. Great service should happen irrespective of the way it is delivered.

Great Expectations Report
ACIS Group
July 2019

11

Good responses are

Solution-focused

Reasonable

Clear

Understanding

Responsive

Transparent

In everyday language

12

Your response needs to contain:

Give guidance:
- What stage?
- Next steps?
- Policy and law?
- Signposting?

Style and tone:
- Be open
- Use plain English
- Avoid jargon
- Show empathy

Outline of complaint
Establish why they're dissatisfied – all elements

The outcome they are looking for

Findings and conclusions

Apology and answers

Actions and timescales

Learning and changes

Redress
compensation or discretionary acts



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Ombudsman's list of components of an effective response

- **Language and tone** - be open, use plain English, avoid jargon and show empathy.
- **Labelling** - clearly label each response, for example, Stage 1, Stage 2 or your 'final' response.
- **Respond to the original complaint and dissatisfaction** - respond to all elements of the original complaint plus any that you may have later agreed to include in the formal complaint. Set out why the complainant was dissatisfied with the previous response.
- **Findings and conclusions** - set out your findings and conclusions on each issue referencing any evidence on which those findings are made.
- **Policy and law** - refer to any relevant policy, procedure, legislation or good practice when explaining a decision.
- **Apology and explanation** - acknowledge and apologise for any mistake or service failure and provide an explanation of what went wrong.
- **Outcome** - consider the outcome the complainant is looking for and how you might be able to provide this or go some way towards providing it.
- **Timescales and actions** - give details and timescales for any actions you plan to take, for example, inspections or repairs.
- **Learning** - explain what you have learnt from the complaint and what changes or improvements will be made as a result.
- **Redress** - give details of any redress offered for example compensation, discretionary, repairs/decorations etc
- **Signposting** - signpost the complainant to other sources of advice or support, such as Citizens' Advice, the Leasehold Advisory Service (LEASE), Shelter, Age UK, Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).
- **Escalation** - provide details of how the complainant can take the complaint to the Housing Ombudsman Service, including the 'Designated Persons' procedure.

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People who complain want to be:

1. Heard
2. Understood
3. Given the service they were after or a reasonable resolution

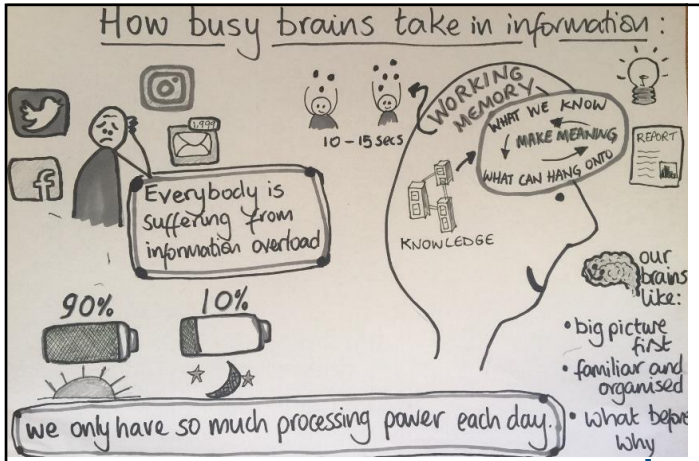
Your response is focused on:

1. Being fair – treat people fairly and follow fair process
2. Putting things right
3. Learning from outcomes

Housing Ombudsman Service
Dispute resolution principles



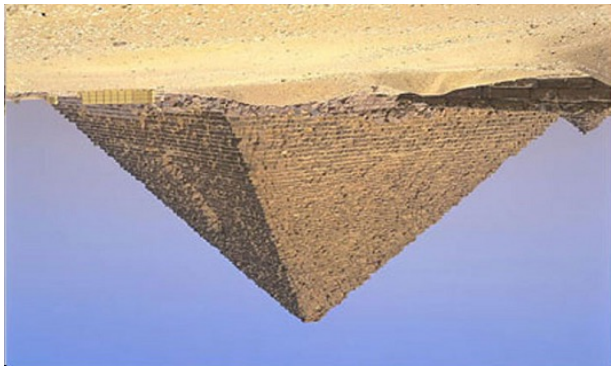
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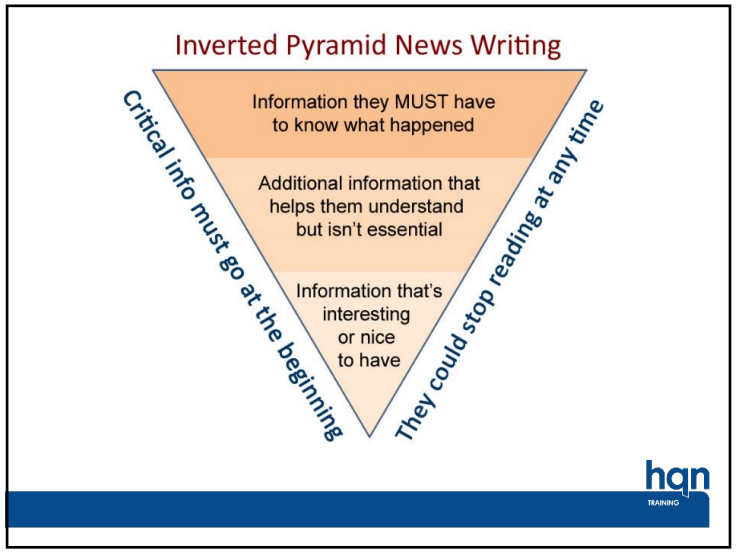
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The inverted pyramid

Getting to the point

18



19



20

Breaking news

Little Red Riding Hood lived in a house in the woods with her mum. One day she took a cake in her basket and set off into the trees to visit her Grandmother.
On the way she met a wolf. “Where are you going?” asked the wolf.
“I’m going to visit my Granny who lives in a little house behind those trees”, explained Little Red Riding Hood.

The wolf smiled, said goodbye and then ran off to Granny’s house and ate her all up. He put on Granny’s glasses and nightie and got into the bed.

Little Red Riding Hood came into the bedroom and said hello to the wolf, thinking it was her Grandma. Then she said, “Granny what big eyes you have.”
“All the better to see you with,” said the wolf.
“What big ears you have”, said Little Red Riding Hood.
“All the better to hear you with,” replied the wolf.
“And what big teeth you have!” exclaimed Little Red Riding Hood.
“All the better to eat you with!” shouted the wolf as he leapt out of the bed lunging for Little Red Riding Hood.

She dodged him and ran screaming into the woods. A woodcutter was nearby chopping down trees, he heard Little Red Riding Hood and ran after the wolf. The woodcutter was quite a sprinter and managed to catch the wolf and chop off his head. Little Red Riding Hood was traumatised, but thankful to be alive.

21



22

Our brains prefer what before why

- Conclusions BEFORE details
- Solutions BEFORE problems
- Requests BEFORE reasons
- Answers BEFORE explanations



23

Readers have three questions

1. Why am I reading this?
2. What do I need to know?
3. What do I need to do?



24

Reader Focused?

Dear Mrs Hassan

I have investigated the issue you raised in your recent phone call to us.

I have found that the lack of a gas supply in your property came about because of a problem with sourcing the correct bayonet fitting in October 2022. Without the correct fitting it was unsafe to connect to the mains gas.

We are now able to provide the correct fitting and so will be able to arrange for the reconnection of the gas supply.

25

Inverted pyramid = reader focused

Dear Mrs Hassan

Your gas supply can be installed next week

You recently let us know that you were unhappy about not having a gas supply for your cooker. Your complaint has been investigated and we are able to arrange for the gas supply to be installed next week.

We're sorry that you did not have the correct fuel supply available in your property. Our investigation showed that....

26

You let us know that:

You are unhappy about how long it has taken to replace your front door.

I agree that it has taken too long to replace your front door and I am sorry we have not provided a good standard of service.

We hope to be able to replace your door by *date.* The new door has been ordered, once it arrives we will contact you to make an appointment to fit it.

The delays have been caused by poor communication with our contractors. Because of this the order for your original replacement door was cancelled. I'm sorry our systems have not worked well. We have identified what went wrong and will be making changes to prevent this from happening again.

Thank you for letting us know about the problem.

27

Take ownership – values into action

The Complaint Handling Code says:

Communication with the resident should not generally identify individual members of staff or contractors as their actions are taken on behalf of the landlord.



28

Reader focused writing

- Helps readers grasp important information early
- And navigate easily



29

Headings can free you from formality



Headings help your reader navigate



30

Three types of heading

1. **Topic heading**	Your complaint ref 679-0
2. **Question heading**	What is our response to your complaint?
3. **Statement heading**	We agree that our service fell short and must apologise

31

Three types of heading

1. **Topic heading**	Heating systems on the Orchard Estate
2. **Question heading**	Why are we renewing your heating system?
3. **Statement heading**	We are renewing the heating system in your home in October

32

The code requires you to

- Be open
- Use plain English/plain language
- Avoid jargon
- Show empathy

Clarity 

33

What is the right tone?

Clear and human!

Write as if to a helpful neighbour

Someone who'd take a parcel in for you, and you might put their bin out.

Friendly but not over-familiar. Respect boundaries.



34

Your residents

Stressed, anxious, and emotional

Bombarded with info



A range of reading abilities

35

Universal design



36

Universal design



37

Universal design?

On review of the correspondence regarding this matter it has been noted that you have advised that you are currently in the process of requesting an Occupational Therapy assessment to establish if a review of the bathroom layout would better suit your needs and have advised us on 8th December 2022 that there is no need at this time to order a shower door while the enquiries about bathroom adaptations are ongoing.

(72 words)

38

Deliver main message clearly

Shower door not ordered as bathroom layout being reviewed

You have let us know that you are waiting for an occupational therapy review of your bathroom layout.

You have agreed that there is no need to order a shower door before this review is done.

You told us this in an email on 8th December 2022.



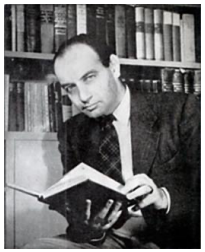
Shorter sentences are easier to process

Go chunky!

39

Sentence length matters

Number of words	Percentage of readers who understand it
30+ words	5%
17-19 words	75%
7 or fewer	95%

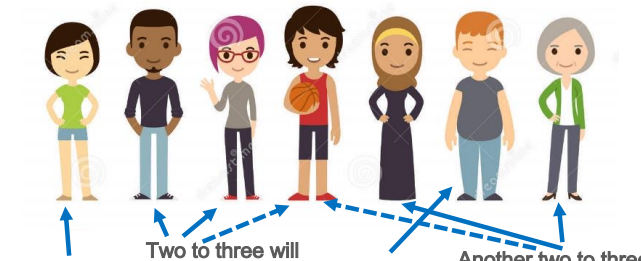


Rudolf Flesch (1911-1986)

40

UK population's reading ability

represented as seven people!



One will have no problems

Two to three will understand straightforward, every day English

One will struggle with the basics

Another two to three will understand more complex words and sentences (GCSE level)

41

Shorter sentences are easier to process

Aim for an average of 15 to 20 words per sentence.



Around 25 is the limit.

42

This feedback ~~is valuable to us for training purposes and to~~ helps us to improve our complaint service to our customers

(~~21~~ 12 words)

Shorter sentences are easier to process

Get rid of any excess

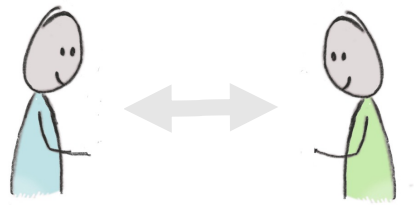
43

Be human

44

Your task is to:

Create understanding
Rebuild trust



Customer You

45

Human is professional

46

~~I can advise that~~ this delay has partly been caused by the job being incorrectly recorded as completed on our ~~records~~. (21 words)

17

Only use words that convey meaning – get rid of those that don't.

47

In general

Try to avoid sounding like a lawyer



48

Specifically

"This is in full and final settlement" is meaningless.

People could still take their complaint to the ombudsman.

Also, it's quite provocative.



49



Everyday language is familiar – takes less mental effort to process

50

Plain English

- Use words well – thinks about the reader's needs
- Be human and direct
- Deliver information effectively



51

Plain English – concentrate on three things

- Plainer words and shorter sentences
- Active, human language
- Most important info first
  organise reply to create understanding



52

Choose plain words – find a plainer alternative

1. Request
2. Endeavour
3. Assist
4. Commence
5. Obtain
6. Prior to
7. Verify
8. Terminate
9. Additional
10. Dwelling
11. Notwithstanding
12. A lack of operative resource within the team.

53

Avoid jargon – find a plainer alternative

1. Works
2. Operative
3. Support referral
4. Job has been raised
5. Rechargeable repairs

54

Use I, We, You, Us, Our

Having reviewed the account I can confirm that payment was received on 10th of April 2023.

55

Positive language = reader focused

- See things from resident's point of view
- Suggest any choices available
- Be specific
- Sound helpful and personal (not bureaucratic)
- Stress the positive consequences



56

Avoid “throat clearers’

During the course of my investigation I found that…	I found that…
The purpose of this letter is to inform you that…	- - -
Needless to say…	- - -

57

Readers have three questions

1. Why am I reading this?
2. What do I need to know?
3. What do I need to do?



58

Reader focused writing

- Helps readers grasp important information early
- And navigate easily



59

The four As recipe for a reply

		So my reader:
1.Acknowledge	empathy not defensiveness	Feels heard and understood
2. Apologise	focus on impact, be specific, sincere and to the point	Feels heard and valued
3. Answers	how and why things happened	Understands
4. Actions	fix or take steps to address concerns	Knows what will happen when (and who will do it). This includes learning and changes.

60

Ombudsman's options for an effective remedy

1. Acknowledgment
2. Apology
3. Answers/explanation

The four As cover it!

4. Change of decision
5. Demonstration of learning
6. Commitment to repairs/other actions
7. Compensation
8. Goodwill gesture
9. Creative solutions

Actions

61

Structuring a response – main message first

Summary -
answer readers three questions

Details -

Learning and changes

Anything else

What stage of process?
Next steps

The four As:
Acknowledge *Answers*
Apologise *Actions*



62



63

Apologising about impact

- "I'm sorry that you had to let us know about this problem."
- "I'm sorry that this has been frustrating you. I can see that that the information has not been clear."
- "I'm sorry for any inconvenience this misunderstanding has caused you."
- "I'm sorry our service was below standard."

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65

ISSUES THAT NEED A RESPONSE	ACKNOWLEDGMENT	ANSWERS	ACTIONS (includes learning)	APOLOGY

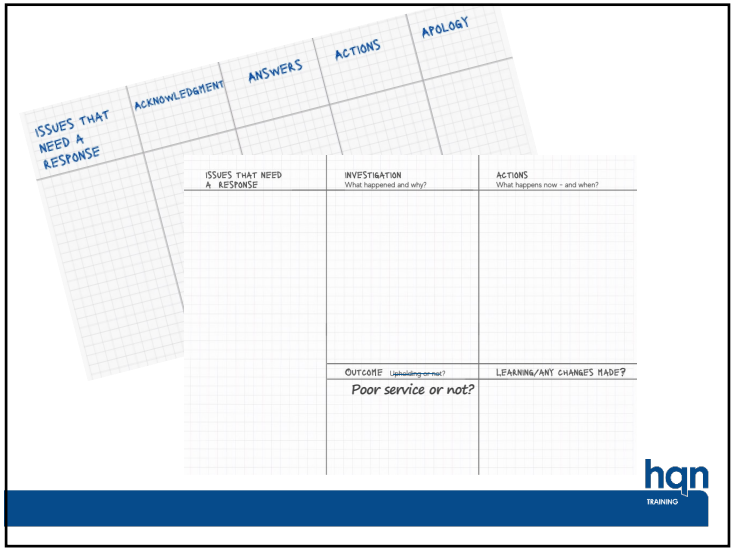
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ISSUES THAT NEED A RESPONSE	ACKNOWLEDGMENT	ANSWERS	ACTIONS (INCLUDING LEARNING)	APOLOGY
1. Leak! How? 2. Repair to kitchen ceiling 3. Safety of electrics/devices 4. Replacements- - kettle + toaster✓ - cooker - needs to claim	Leak - shock/out of her hands Disruption and damage	Plumbing job in flat above - faulty joint	Ceiling repair - appointment? Safety tests - electrics Replacements - kettle ✓ - toaster✓ - cooker -form, next steps to take Learning Reminders to repair staff? Protocols?	For stress and time and trouble For damage

67

ISSUES THAT NEED A RESPONSE	INVESTIGATION What happened and why?	ACTIONS What happens now - and when?
	OUTCOME ~~Upholding or not?~~ *Poor service or not?*	LEARNING/ANY CHANGES MADE?

68



69

Good writing is a three stage process

1. Think and plan
2. Write
3. Review



70

A good ending?

If you request a review (stage two), please explain why you remain dissatisfied and what you are seeking as an outcome. You must request a review within 20 days. Reasons for requesting a review can include:

1. We have got something wrong	Please let us know if we haven't fully investigated your complaint or have used incorrect information in making our decision.
2. We don't do what we say we will	If we have agreed to carry out actions in this response but fail to do so either within the times we have said or to an acceptable standard.
3. We have not followed our policy	Our complaint policy is available on our website.

71

Compensation

needs to be for something

comes down to:

- **level of service failure**
- **impact on customer**

72

Compensating for

Time and trouble	extent they had to go to	Making phone calls Staying in…
Distress and inconvenience	impact on individual and on others	Going without a service A poor repair
Cumulative impact	one plus one can be three	Leak = damage + stress + outlay for buckets A second or third incident?
Medical evidence	consider any	

73

Gestures of goodwill – mind your language!

Be careful how you use the phrase "gesture of goodwill".

Compensation is **due** – don't mix them up



74

Tone is important

People might be happy with the outcome but not with **how** they've been treated.

Are you resident-focused?



75

Writing

As easy as 1-2-3

1. Think and plan
2. Write (first crap draft)
3. Edit / revise



76

Revising

1. Edit/revise in the morning
2. Print things out
3. Change the font
4. Read in the wrong order
5. Read out loud



77

People who complain want to be:

1. Heard
2. Understood
3. Given the service they were after or a reasonable resolution

Your response is focused on:

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2. Putting things right
3. Learning from outcomes

78

Good responses are

Solution-focused

Reasonable

Clear

Understanding

Responsive

Transparent

In everyday language

79

Checklist for better responses

STRUCTURE

1. Starts with what your reader most wants to know?	How quickly do you answer: 1. Why am I reading this? 2. What do I need to know? 3. What do I need to do?
2. Is it chunky with helpful headings?	**Summarise** support with details
3. Ends well?	Positive and clear

80

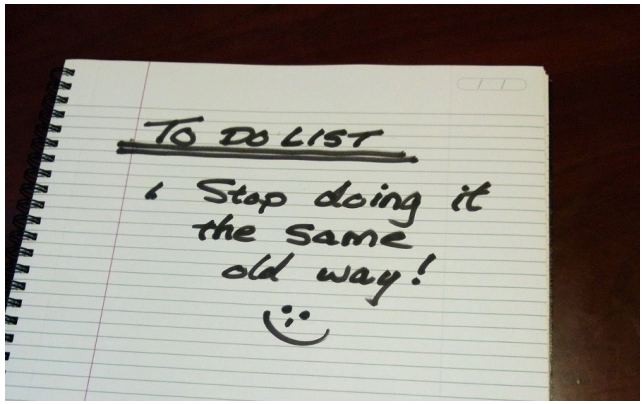
Checklist for better responses

CONTENT

1. Plain English?	✓ Everyday language ✓ Shorter sentences ✓ Be human
2. Reader focused?	✓ About their needs/concerns ✓ Create understanding
3. All points answered and owned?	✓ Don't blame others ✓ Include learning ✓ Use the four As

hqn TRAINING

81



hqn TRAINING

82



Thank you

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