

Checklist for Plain Language

Use this checklist to see if your document meets plain language standards.

	Plain Language Guidelines	Description	✓
1	Written for your audience.	Uses language the audience understands and feels comfortable with. Focused on what audience wants to know.	
2	Organized to serve the reader's needs.	Starts by stating your purpose and the bottom line. Content is laid out in a logical order. Most important information is at the beginning, and background information (when necessary) toward the end.	
3	Has useful headings. Types of headings: question; statement; topic.	Document's organization and structure is revealed with headings. Headings are structured to the audience's concerns, concise and descriptive. Focus is on clarity over brevity. Font is bolded black typeface.	
4	Uses pronouns ("you") to speak directly to the reader.	Addresses the user directly. Defines "you" by identifying the audience in the beginning of the document; defines "you" in different contexts, or when writing to multiple audiences.	
5	Uses active voice.	Clarifies who is performing the action. Eliminates ambiguity about responsibilities. The person is the subject of the sentence.	
6	Uses short sections and short sentences.	Sections are broken up so they are easier to comprehend and include useful headings to help the reader scan the page. One idea is expressed in each sentence. Sentences contain 15 words or less; paragraphs are 6 lines or less.	
7	Uses the present tense.	Written as much as possible in the present tense to clarify the material for the reader. Uses tenses other than the present only when necessary for accuracy.	
8	Avoids hidden verbs.	Uses base verbs, not hidden verbs (endings such as: -ment, -tion, -sion, -ance; or, link with verbs: achieve, effect, give, have, make, reach and take)	
9	Writing is concise.	Omits excess words, complex sentences, redundant words and information the audience does not need to know. Cuts out excess modifiers (absolutely, actually, completely, really, quite, totally and very). Avoids doublets and triplets (cease and desist = stop).	
10	Uses concrete, familiar words.	Avoid undefined technical words and medical jargon, abbreviations and acronyms.	
11	Uses "must" to express requirements; avoids ambiguous word "shall."	Instead of "shall," uses "must" for an obligation; "must not" for a prohibition; "may" for a discretionary action; "should" for a recommendation.	
12	Places words carefully to clarify meaning and reduce ambiguity.	Avoids large gaps between the subject, verb and object; puts exceptions last; puts conditionals ("only" or "always" next to the words they modify.	
13	Uses lists to simplify complex material. Use tables to help your audience see relationships that are often hidden in dense text.	Uses lists to highlight levels of importance; help the reader understand order of events, skim and scan and outline steps in a process. Includes a lead in sentence to help explain lists. Bullets are solid round or square and contain no more than three levels. Bullets can make a complete sentence if combined with the lead in sentence. Lists are placed at the end of a passage.	
14	Uses no more than two or three subordinate levels.		