

A Plain-Language Checklist for Reviewing Your Document

Do I know my audience?

- Consider your potential readers.
Who is your audience, exactly? Are there multiple audiences?
- Evaluate the needs of your readers.
What do they want to know? How much detail do they need? What is the right tone for this audience? What action do you want readers to take?
- Engage your audience.
Use style, word choice, voice, organization, and visuals to draw your readers into your message.

Did I organize my document or product for my reader?

- Provide a clear take-away message.
Your document should convey a clear, specific message
Put your main message first.

topic. Make sure each section or paragraph of your document answers a reader's question.

Have I used an easy-to-read style?

- Use first-person and second-person pronouns when appropriate.
Using the pronouns I, you, and we make your document more conversational and help your reader focus on your message.
Use familiar, concrete, non-technical words.
Unless you are writing for a group of experts, limit the use of jargon and technical terms.
Consider whether each adjective and adverb adds meaning.
Avoid padding your writing with words like very, really, actually, or carefully.

Have I written this as concisely as possible and kept the message?

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
Try to write paragraphs of no more than 5 to 7 sentences and sentences of 10 to 20 words.
- Write sentences focused on one idea.
Write paragraphs that have a single theme. Sentences and paragraphs that focus on developing an idea are easier for readers.

Have I used the right visuals?

- Use illustrations or visuals.
Visuals, such as lists, tables, and infographics, can help the reader understand your message.
- Use typography and white space appropriately.
Fonts and other typographical elements should make your document more readable, not fancier. Having enough blank space in the margins and between sections also increases readability.

Have I written in the active voice?

- Use the active voice whenever possible.
The active voice makes it clear who or what (the subject) is doing the action (the verb). Passive sentences often do not clearly identify who is performing the action.

Did I make my document “skimmable”?

- Use headings.
Headings enable your reader to skim your document. Write headings in the form of questions, sentences, or phrases.
- Use vertical lists (numbers or bullets).
Lists, which group similar items, are easy for readers to skim. Choose numbers when presenting a list with items in a specific sequence or rank order. Use bullets when the items listed are equivalent in importance.

For more information, visit Plain Language: Getting Started or Brushing Up at www.nih.gov/plainlanguage/gettingstarted