



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.**
In most cases, readers appreciate documents that begin with the main point.
- Answer their questions.**
Before writing your document, write down the questions your readers have about your 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