Plain Language Checklist

Plain Language: Keys to Success

What is plain language?

When you write in plain language, readers can understand what you write the first time they read it.

When you write in plain language, readers can

find what they need,

understand what they find, and

act appropriately on that understanding,

in the time and effort they are willing to spend.

Can legal and technical information be in Plain language?

Yes. When you write in plain language, you are more likely to be accurate, precise, sufficient, and unambiguous. Plain language is especially important in legal and scientific documents to ensure they are both technically precise and legally sufficient while also being as clear as possible for the intended audience.

How can I be sure I am writing in plain language?

Use this Plain Language checklist to be sure you've used good techniques

Does document meet the readers' needs?
☐ Do I have a clear idea of who will read this document?
☐ Does the format match the readers' needs?
☐ Does the content meet the readers' needs?
☐ Does it answer the readers' questions in the order they will ask them?
☐ Does it include only what the reader needs to know, omitting unneccessary information?

Is the message clear?
☐ Is the main message up front?
☐ Will the message be clear to my readers?

☐ Have I logically arranged each section?
☐ Is the document an appropriate length?
☐ Will my reader know what to do with the information?

Are the paragraphs effective?
☐ Do the paragraphs begin with the main idea?
☐ Are the paragraphs the right length?

Are the sentences effective?
☐ Are any sentences too long or too short?
☐ Have I used active voice most of the time?
☐ Have I used concise, well-constructed sentences?
☐ Have I kept the subject, verb, and object together?
☐ Have I used action verbs instead of nouns made out of verbs?
☐ Have I used a conversational tone and the reader's words?
☐ Have I defined words when necessary?

Are the words effective?
☐ Does the word choice match the readers' needs and skills?
☐ Did I use concrete and familiar words?
☐ Did I avoid jargon and other unclear words, such as concept and value words?
☐ Did I use pronouns to speak to the reader?
☐ Did I eliminate extra words and unnecessary information?
☐ Did I define all acronyms?

Have I used headings effectively?
☐ Does each page have at least one heading?
☐ Do the headings clearly describe the information that follows?
☐ Do the headings cover all the ideas in their section?
☐ Is the heading format consistent throughout the document?
☐ Are the headings close to the information that follows, so they don't "float?"

Did I use list and tables?
☐ Can I turn any information into a bulleted list?
☐ Did I consistently punctuate my lists?
☐ Do all the items in the list follow logically from the list introduction?
☐ Can I turn any information into an "if…then" table?

Have I checked the spelling and grammar?

☐ Have I checked the spelling with more than *Spellcheck*?

☐ Have I checked to be sure it's all grammatically correct?

☐ Have I checked the punctuation?

Does it <u>look</u> easy to read?

☐ Have I used enough white space to make it look uncluttered and inviting?

☐ Have I used effective emphasis techniques – such as bold and colors NOT ALL CAPS?

☐ Have I added graphics where they will illustrate the message?

☐ Is the font at least 12 points?

☐ Is the text both upper and lower case –?

☐ Is there enough contrast between font color and background color?