**Plain Language Writing Audit Tool[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Document Title: Type of Document:**

**Purpose of Document:**

**Target Audience: Reading level:**

**Target Audience most pressing need:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **GUIDELINE** | **YES** | **NO** | **N/A** |
| **EDIT FOR THE AUDIENCE** |  |  |  |
| The content meets the readers’ needs. |  |  |  |
| The purpose is clear. Readers know right away what the document is about and how they should use it. |  |  |  |
| The tone is conversational.  *E.g. use of “you” to address the audience; use of contractions if appropriate.* |  |  |  |
| **EDIT THE OVERALL STRUCTURE AND CONTENT** |  |  |  |
| Readers can quickly understand how the document is organized.  *E.g. Table of Contents, effective lead sentences, etc.* |  |  |  |
| The content answers the readers’ questions in the order they will ask them.  *Note: Using a Q&A format can be effective in conveying your content.* |  |  |  |
| The document is divided into short sections, with headings and subheadings. |  |  |  |
| The document uses no more than two or three subordinate subheadings. |  |  |  |
| The headings clearly describe the information that follows. |  |  |  |
| The most important information appears at the start of the document and the start of each section. |  |  |  |
| The content only includes what the reader needs to know; excludes extra info |  |  |  |
| The content clearly explains complicated ideas. |  |  |  |
| The content respects gender, culture, and other differences. |  |  |  |
| **EDIT THE PARAGRAPHS** |  |  |  |
| Paragraphs are short. Each has one idea and includes only 2-4 sentences each. |  |  |  |
| Point form, tables or numbered lists are used where appropriate. |  |  |  |
| Instructions are presented in the correct order. |  |  |  |
| **EDIT THE SENTENCES** |  |  |  |
| Sentences are short. Each has one idea and includes 20 to 25 words or less.  *NOTE: Keep the subject, verb, and object together in your sentence construction.* |  |  |  |
| Sentences are written in the positive as much as possible.  *E.g. “Policies are valid if …” not “no policy is valid unless …”*  *NOTE: If you cannot reword positively, bold or italicise the negative.* |  |  |  |
| Sentences are active, not passive.  *e.g. “they decided …” not “a decision was made …”*  *NOTE: if you ask “by whom?” after a sentence and don’t have an answer, it’s probably passive. E.g. Engagement measures will be implemented to ensure commitment (by whom?)*  *Passive sentences also start with or include vague uses of “there are/was/is, it is/was/has”* |  |  |  |
| Phrases have been reduced to words where possible.  *E.g. “Experienced travellers” not “People who are experienced at travelling”* |  |  |  |
| **EDIT THE WORDS** |  |  |  |
| Words are short and simple; common words are used instead of jargon. |  |  |  |
| Present tense is used as much as possible. |  |  |  |
| Noun strings are simplified or removed. |  |  |  |
| Words are specific (i.e. no multiple meanings), descriptive, and concrete.  *NOTE: Lazy verbs like “Make, do, take, have, had, give, gave, use, came” can often be replaced with more active, descriptive verbs. E.g. Not: He* ***makes*** *money. But: He* ***earns*** *money. Also words that end in “–ing” are usually weaker than strong, direct verbs. E.g. Not: He is* ***facing*** *life in prison. But: He* ***faces*** *life in prison.* |  |  |  |
| Technical terms are defined or left out.  *NOTE: You can use technical terms your audience already knows.* |  |  |  |
| Acronyms are defined or left out. |  |  |  |
| The word choice matches the readers’ needs and skills? |  |  |  |
| **EDIT THE FORMATTING** |  |  |  |
| Headings and subheadings are different size and font than the main text. |  |  |  |
| The heading format is consistent throughout the document. |  |  |  |
| The main text is at least 12 point.  *NOTE: Serif typefaces (such as Times Roman and Palatino), which have small lines at the ends of the letter strokes, are easier to read because they direct the reader’s eye from letter to letter.[[2]](#footnote-2)* |  |  |  |
| The text is both upper and lower case and only titles are capitalized. |  |  |  |
| The left margin is justified and the right margin is ragged (Align Left in MS Word). |  |  |  |
| Paragraphs and sections have white space between them and look uncluttered and inviting. |  |  |  |
| There is enough contrast between font color and background color. |  |  |  |
| Photos, graphs, or other design features break up text and make information clearer. |  |  |  |

1. Checklist and content from: NWT Literacy Council, *Plain Language Audit Tool.* [136648a\_nwt\_literacy\_audit\_tool.pdf](http://www.nwtliteracy.ca/sites/default/files/files/Resources/plainlanguage/136648a_nwt_literacy_audit_tool.pdf), 2015, p. 7-9. Modified with information from: Center for Plain Language, *Plain Language Checklist*. <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/plain-language-checklist/>, 2014-2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Public Works and Government Services, Government of Canada, *The Canadian Style, 13 Plain Language*. <http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tcdnstyl-chap?lang=eng&lettr=chapsect13&info0=13> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)