Plain language checklist

Writing in plain language means using writing techniques and layout design to make a message clear to the reader.

There are no rules on how to write in plain language – just guidelines. The guidelines are there to help you, but they should be used with different contexts and audiences in mind.

There are two stages to writing a document in plain English:

Stage 1: Planning the structure and flow of the document.

Stage 2: Writing the sentences using plain language techniques.

Stage 1: Structure and flow

A clear structure helps the reader find the most important information first. This helps them understand the meaning and take action faster.

Before you start writing, think about your reader, then plan the structure of your document.

Understand your reader and your purpose

Who will read the document?

_____

What do they need to know?

_____

In what circumstances they will read it?

_____

What is your purpose?

_____

Techniques to make your information easy to find

☐ Insert important information near the beginning of the document

☐ Use a table of contents

☐ Use headings to structure the information clearly

☐ Use white space to make the page look uncluttered

☐ Use images, diagrams, tables and graphs to help your reader quickly understand instructions or explanations

Stage 2: Plain language techniques

These techniques are guidelines for using plain language in writing. Consider whether each one is appropriate for your context. It's OK to break a guideline when it's not appropriate.

For more detail on each point, see my article on plain language writing.

1. **Use short sentences** – sentences should be no more than 15 to 20 words.

2. **Use active voice** – active voice is easier and quicker to understand.

3. **Use 'you', 'we' and 'I'** – this makes the writing personal.

4. **Choose words that your reader will know** – use words that your reader will understand. Avoid jargon unless you are sure your readers will know it.

5. **Give direct instructions** – it's OK to use commands. You can use 'please' to soften the command, but this gives the reader the option to refuse.

6. **Be positive** – giving positive instructions makes them easier to understand.

7. **Avoid nominalisations** – nominalisations are a verb or adjective used as a noun, such as 'failure' for 'fail'. These require adding unnecessary words that can slow understanding.

8. **Use lists** – using bullet points makes the information easy to read and understand.

9. **Avoid clichés** – a cliché doesn't usually mean what the words say.

10. **Choose the plainer option** – filler words may feel polite to use but they are in the way of making your message quick and easy to understand.