The Center for Plain Language (CPL) is a 501(c)(3), non-profit organization. The CPL helps government agencies and businesses write clearly. To learn more about the organization go to: <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/>

Plain language writers communicate effectively because they understand who will (and will not) use the document or website they are writing. They create products that—

* speak clearly and directly to the target group
* anticipate what readers already know and what they need to learn
* present information logically
* include content only if it is needed
* help the reader move through the content efficiently and act on it confidently
* create trust in the company or agency

A document, web site or other information is in plain language if the target audience can read it, understand what they read, and confidently act on it.

The 5-Step checklist for writing in plain language is provided on the next page.

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| *Item* |  | **Step 1. Identify and describe the target audience**. *The audience definition works when you know who you are and are not designing for, what they want to do, and what they know and need to learn.* |
| *1* |  | Define the target groups that will use the document or website |
| *2* |  | List and prioritize top tasks by audience group |
| *3* |  | List what people in each audience group need or need to know to complete tasks |
| *4* |  | List characteristics of the groups that should influence writing design (for example, age, computer experience, etc.) |
|  |  | **Step 2: Structure the content to guide the reader through it.** *The structure works when readers can quickly and confidently find the information they are looking for.* |
| *5* |  | Organize the content so that it flows logically |
| *6* |  | Break content into short sections that reflect natural stopping points |
| *7* |  | Write headings that help readers predict what is coming up |
|  |  | **Step 3: Write the content in plain language.** *The design works when users notice and use the signposts to move through the information efficiently.* |
|  |  | **Keep it short and to the point** |
| *8* |  | Write short but logical sentences |
| *9* |  | Present important information first in each section, subsection, and paragraph |
| *10* |  | Include the details that help the reader complete the task |
| *11* |  | Leave out details that don’t help or may distract readers, even if they are interesting |
| *12* |  | Use transitions to connect ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or sections |
|  |  | **Set a helpful tone** |
| *13* |  | Use a conversational, rather than legal or bureaucratic tone |
|  |  | **Pick the right words** |
| *14* |  | Use strong verbs in the active voice |
| *15* |  | Use words the audience knows |
| *16* |  | Make titles or list elements parallel (for example, start each with a verb) |
| *17* |  | For websites: Match the link wording to landing page names |
|  |  | **Step 4: Use information design to help readers see and understand.** *The design works when users notice and use the signposts to move through the information efficiently.* |
| *18* |  | Use headers and sub-headers to organize the information |
| *19* |  | Use typography (font size, color, bold, etc.) to guide the reader’s attention |
| *20* |  | Use whitespace to organize the information |
| *21* |  | Use images to make content easier to understand |
|  |  | **Step 5: Work with the target user groups to test the design and content*.*** *The document or site works when target users can find what they need, understand what they find, and act on it confidently.* |
|  |  | **Test the design at multiple points** |
| *22* |  | Were audience needs, such as top tasks, prioritized based on user research? |
| *23* |  | Did you test that the navigation labels and information organization for predictability? |
| *24* |  | Did you test the content for readability and understandability? |
| *25* |  | Did you test the final product? |
|  |  | **Use evidence-based testing strategies** |
| *26* |  | Did the participants represent the target audience groups? |
| *27* |  | Did you test your design and content with enough people? |
| *28* |  | How was reader understanding and ability to act measured? |
| *29* |  | Was there a before-and-after comparison to demonstrate improvement? |
|  |  | **Check that the final product is useful and usable** |
| *30* |  | Ask readers to describe who and what the document or site is intended for |
| *31* |  | Have them show you how they would find the information they want or need |
| *32* |  | Ask them to describe key concepts or processes in their own words |
| *33* |  | Observe whether target users can finish key tasks easily and confidently |
| *34* |  | Note where they stumble or misunderstand and rethink those parts of the site or document |