Center for Plain Language

Clear Communications Checklist

Building clear communications takes time, thought, planning and revising. The value is clear: Better relationship with the people who matter to you.

Checklists are helpful when there's just too much to remember, and the stakes are high.

Pilots and surgeons use checklists to help ensure a smooth and successful process (like landing the plane or amputating the correct limb). Communicators also use checklists to be as clear as possible. Don't risk being unclear!

Here's what to think about when planning for clear language:

PLAN FIRST

KEEP IT CONVERSATIONAL

USE THE RIGHT TONE

VISUAL DISPLAY

Plan First, Plan Well.

It is said that good writing is all about re-writing. That's true. But smart planning goes a long way toward creating effective copy, too.

✓ **Focus on one topic or goal**
Try to stick to one topic or goal. And then make it as clear as you can as quickly as possible so your reader knows what to expect.

✓ **Anticipate reader questions**
After you finish your outline (and later your first draft) think, "What questions will people be asking about this?" If you can't step back enough, ask a colleague for help.

✓ **Address the needs of the reader**
From their point of view, ask, "Why am I getting this letter, webpage, brochure, app…? What do I do next? What are they selling? Do I have to complete a task?"

Keep it Conversational: The Right Tone Connects with People

Plain language is all about making things easier for readers. A friendly tone and a clear writing style can make even difficult messages and tough news easier to accept.

✓ **Write the way you speak**
Conversational writing is a simple and friendly way to get your message across. Avoid that old-fashioned, bossy, "institutional" voice or one that sounds like a lawyer.

✓ **Use an active voice**
An active voice makes clear the "actor" and action in each sentence. "I ate the donuts" contains more information than "The donuts were eaten," which raises a question.

✓ **Use personal pronouns**
Addressing the reader with "you" makes it undeniably clear who needs to take an action.

The Right Style Makes It Easy to Read.

Plain language does not mean "dumbing down." It's about connecting with smart, busy people who don't have the time or interest to decipher weak, confusing or thoughtless language.

✓ **Use short words**
Writing to communicate clearly is about being simple and direct.

✓ **Use familiar words**
Why use "physician" when "doctor" is so spot on? It's good for busy people, smart people, people who learn English as a second language and, really, every other reader.

✓ **Write short sentences**
Break long sentences into smaller ones. Try to use more sentences that use a simple "noun-verb" construction. Keep the noun and verb close together in most sentences.

✓ **Avoid jargon**
Most industries use jargon (shorthand words and phrases) to communicate with others who know the secret language. But these words exclude outsiders.

Visual Display: Looks Matter

Pretend your document, web page, phone app or other communication vehicle has to attract a mate on Match.com. You want to it to appear attractive and appealing.

✓ **Design with ample white space**
No one wants to read a wall of gray text. **Invite readers** in by letting your text breathe.

✓ **Use bold headers**
Headers act as signposts, directing skimmers to the info they want. Headers work like story guides, too, highlighting what the piece is about to draw readers in.

✓ **Feature bulleted lists** (or numbers)
Lists are an easy way to capture your readers' eyes. Keep them brief – in length (use words or phrases, not full sentences) and number (don't use too many).

The Center for Plain Language, a non-profit organization, helps government agencies and businesses write clear and understandable communications. The Center supports those who use plain language, trains those who should use plain language, and urges people to demand plain language in all the communications they receive, read, and use.

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