

Plain English Writing and Clear Design Questions

Would you read it?

These questions cover what could be considered the main plain English writing and clear design techniques. To help assess how your document is shaping up, ask yourself, “*Would you read it?*” And then to help you answer whether you would or not, try answering these questions.

Plain English writing and clear design are part technical and part creative. Accordingly, the questions touch on techniques that represent guidelines to enhancing readability and understanding—they are not rules. The application of the techniques requires judgment based on situational factors like the communication objectives and especially the background of your intended audience (i.e., literacy level, reading ability, and current knowledge—to name a few).

Plain English Writing Techniques Answer these questions based on the characteristics of your target audience (i.e., literacy level, reading ability, current knowledge of the topic and so on)
• Did you develop an objective and does your finished piece meet the objective?
• Did you develop an outline or is the information based on a previously developed outline or template?
• Have you checked that your information provides only relevant content for your target audience (i.e., information the audience needs to know, focused on your target audience and not you or your sponsoring organization)?
• Have you organized your information logically from your target audience’s perspective?
• Have you broken up your information into what could be considered “manageable chunks”—so that it focuses on your key messages but isn’t too daunting to read?
• If your target audience were to scan your information (which is typically the case), would they easily grasp the main points? For example, you can think of subheadings as an internal table of contents that helps your target audience know what’s coming up and piece together your main message. In addition to subheadings, also try bulleted lists, charts, checklists, sidebars and pull quotes.
• Have you included only concrete information from the audience’s perspective?
• Have you made your information descriptive when necessary to enhance clarity for the audience (e.g., information via brackets, examples, diagrams, illustrations, and charts)?
• Have you used a tone and language that is appropriate for your target audience?
• Have you made your information engaging and in the active voice as much as possible?
• Have you made your information concise, with short sentences, short words, and no unnecessary words?

Feel free to share but please do not revise.

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Plain English Writing Techniques

Answer these questions based on the characteristics of your target audience (i.e., literacy level, reading ability, current knowledge of the topic and so on)

- Have you considered techniques like keeping sentences short with the subject and verb close together, ideally near the beginning of the sentence? What about breaking up the 'wall of words' with techniques like subheadings, bulleted lists, charts, checklists, sidebars and pull quotes?
- Have you made your information direct, only including redundant phrases and repetition if they add clarity?
- Have you explained any technical or complicated terms at the level appropriate for the audience?
- Have you included idioms (jargon, clichés) and figures of speech only if they are appropriate for your target audience and have you used abbreviations only if you are sure they add clarity?
- Have you used a consistent structure and consistent language throughout your information including headings and body text?
- Have you checked that everything is accurate (i.e., information, grammar, and spelling)?
- Have you built field testing into the development plan?
- Overall, is the writing style appropriate for the medium (i.e., hard copy versus web)?

Clear Design Techniques

- Is the body text clear and comfortable for your target audience to read (e.g., in most cases, left-justified body text)?
- Is the information easy for your target audience to find due to consistent font use and styles?
- Is your font choice appealing for your target audience?
- Is your layout inviting with an appropriate amount of white space?
- Are your images and graphics relevant to the content and appropriate for your target audience (i.e., the graphic treatments add clarity rather than take away from it by adding clutter)?
- Overall, is your design appropriate for the medium? (i.e., hard copy versus web)