Plain English check-up for editorial style guides

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Traditional editorial style guides typically include guidelines related to the fundamentals of grammar and punctuation (e.g., use of apostrophes, colons and commas) and formatting conventions (e.g., use of bold, italics, spacing and headings), as well as details regarding corporate branding messages and citations.

If clear information is a priority for your organization, consider structuring your entire editorial style guide around clear writing principles OR keep a traditional approach but add a section dedicated to clear writing. Below are suggestions for editorial style guidelines that will help your audiences better understand your information so they can act on it.

Style guide section	Style guideline examples
Document purpose	• Check whether the information is currently being used by your target group and if so, what has worked well versus areas for improvement. • Understand how the information is distributed (e.g., as standalone information or with other materials) and how your target group accesses the information (e.g., receives hard copy in the mail, downloads online copy, reads on screen, always accompanied by discussion).
Organizing information	Organize information logically from your target group's perspective, for example: • From most important to your target group to least important • From easier concepts to more difficult • From things that affect most to those that affect few • From general information to specific details
Selecting content	• Only provide information that the target group considers relevant. • Add descriptions to explain technical or complicated terms at the level appropriate for the target group.
Paragraphs and sentences	• Use headings and subheadings to walk your target group through information. • Limit each sentence to one complete thought per sentence. • Keep the subject and verb close together using a straightforward, simple structure as much as possible (e.g., subject followed by verb followed by object like "the cat sat on the mat"). • Aim for under 25 words per sentence. • Use the active voice whenever possible.
Visual aids	• Use lists and other formats like charts, checklists, graphs and diagrams to make information easy to read and understand.
Words	• Use words that are familiar to your target group and appropriate for their characteristics (i.e., literacy level, current topic knowledge). • Delete any unnecessary words so the information is concise and direct; only include repetition if it adds clarity. • Re-write nominalization (i.e., nominalization is using verbs as if they were nouns). • Only use acronyms, idioms, and abbreviations if you are sure they are well known by your target group.
Note: guidelines can be used to critique all types of written materials to make them as clear as possible.	

To learn more about these guidelines, read the *Tip of the Month* at www.clearlanguageatwork.com