Plain Language Writing Checklist

Use this checklist to make your writing more readable.

Who will read this writing?

☐ **Consider your potential readers.**

Are you writing for students? Faculty? Staff? Outside the college?

☐ **Evaluate the needs of your readers.**

What do you need them to know? How much detail do they need? What is the right tone for this audience?

What *action* do you want your readers to take?

☐ **Engage your audience.**

Use style, word choice, voice, organization and visuals to draw your readers into your message.

Have I organized my document for my reader?

☐ **Provide a clear take-away message in a title or subject line.**

Your document should convey a clear, specific message, like *What You Need to Do to Pass this Course.*

☐ **Put your main message first.**

Readers usually appreciate documents that begin with the main point.

☐ **Imagine your readers' questions; answer them.**

Before writing your document, write down the questions your readers have or would likely have about your topic. Make sure each section or paragraph of your document answers a reader's question.

Did I use an easy-to-read style?

☐ **Use *I*, *you*, and *we* to make your document more conversational.**

These 'first and second person pronouns' make your document more conversational and help your reader focus on your message.

☐ **Use familiar, concrete, non-technical words where possible.**

Limit use of jargon and technical terms where possible.
Using technical terms? Remind readers what the terms mean where you can.
Your reader is probably not an expert. Help them 'get' the message.

☐ **Cut the padding: *very, really, actually, carefully.***

Does each adjective and adverb add meaning? Avoid padding your writing with **extra words.**

Are the sentences and paragraphs to-the-point?

☐ **Keep sentences and paragraphs concise.**
Try to write sentences of 10 to 20 words and paragraphs of no more than 5 to 7 sentences. Paragraphs can be even shorter for texts to be read online.

☐ **Write sentences focused on one idea. Paragraphs should have one focus too.**
Sentences and paragraphs that focus on developing one idea are easier for readers.

Did I use tables and infographics for an easy to understand message?

☐ **Use illustrations or visuals.**
Visuals, such as lists, tables, and infographics, can help the reader understand your message.

☐ **Use typography and white space appropriately.**
Fonts and other typographical elements should make your document more readable, not fancier. Having enough blank space in the margins and between sections also increases readability.

Did I write in the active voice?

☐ **Use active voice when you can: *He ate six doughnuts* not *Six doughnuts were eaten.***
An active voice sentence makes it clear who or what is doing the action.
A passive sentence often doesn't clearly identify who is performing the action.

Did I use headings and lists to make the writing faster to read?

☐ **Use headings.**
Headings enable your reader to skim your document. Write headings in the form of questions, sentences, or phrases.

☐ **Use vertical lists (numbers or bullets).**
Lists, which group similar items, are easy for readers to skim.
- Choose *numbers* to present a list with items in a specific sequence or rank order.
- Use *bullets* when the items listed are equally important.