

Instructions

Before going through the checklist, think about the most important thing you want your reader to learn or know.

Read the checklist items below. Cross out items that do not apply to your document. For example, if there are no pictures in your document, then cross out “Uses relevant and uncluttered images or diagrams”. Read your document once to get a sense of the overall readability and flow. Read the document again considering the items on the checklist. Make changes if required. If appropriate, ask others to review the document when you are finished.

SMIT (Single Most Important Thing):

BLAM (Bottom Line Actionable Message):

Word Choice

- Uses familiar, everyday words
- Uses ‘you’ and other pronouns to speak to the reader
- Uses active voice
- Uses base verbs
- Omits excess words
- Uses the simplest tense possible – simple present tense is best
- Uses ‘must’ to express requirements
- Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; places modifiers correctly)

Design

- Uses short sentences and sections
- Has useful headings
- Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material
- Uses no more than two or three sub-levels
- Uses relevant, uncluttered images or diagrams

Knowledge Translation Principles

- Written for the reader
- Organized to serve the reader's needs
- Content is accurate and evidence-based
- The material is actionable, if appropriate

Plain Language Writing Checklist - Detailed

SMIT (Single Most Important Thing):

BLAM (Bottom Line Actionable Message):

Word Choice

- Uses familiar, everyday words**
 - Don't use big or complicated words. They are confusing. Define (and limit) acronyms and abbreviations. Avoid medical jargon, Latin words, and legal terms.

- Uses 'you' and other pronouns to speak to the reader**
 - Using pronouns engages the reader. They make information and directions more meaningful. Use 'you' to address the reader. Use 'I' when writing from the reader's point of view, such as questions in a Q & A section. Define pronouns like 'we', 'he', 'she', and 'they' before you use them.

- Uses active voice**
 - Active voice tells the reader who is doing what. Active sentences are structured with the actor first (the subject), and then the verb, and then the object of the action.
For example, 'The woman took her medication' NOT 'The medication was taken by the woman.'

- Uses base verbs**
 - Use base verbs, not hidden verbs.
*Say 'we manage the program' NOT 'we are responsible for management of the program'.
Say 'we analyzed the data' NOT 'we conducted an analysis of the data.'*

- Omits excess words**
 - Remove excess words. Challenge every word – do you need it? Pronouns, active voice, and base verbs help get rid of excess words. So does eliminating modifiers. *For example, in 'The Federal and Provincial Governments issued a joint report' you don't need the word 'joint.' In 'this information is really critical' you don't need the word 'really.'*

- Uses the simplest tense possible – simple present tense is best**
 - The simplest verb tense is the clearest. Use simple present tense whenever possible.
Say, 'We issue a report every quarter,' NOT 'We will be issuing a report every quarter.'

Words Choice Continued

- ❑ **Uses ‘must’ to express requirements**
 - Use ‘must’, not ‘shall’, to impose requirements. ‘Shall’ is ambiguous, and rarely occurs in everyday conversation.
- ❑ **Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; place modifiers correctly)**
 - Placing words carefully within a sentence is as important as organizing your document. Keep subject, verb, and object close together. Put exceptions at the end. Place modifiers correctly.

Design

- ❑ **Uses short sentences and sections**
 - Using short sentences, paragraphs and sections helps your reader get through your material. Chunking your material into sections also inserts white space. White space (also known as negative space) makes your content easier to look at.
- ❑ **Has useful headings**
 - Headings help the reader find their way through your material. Headings should apply to every sub-point under the heading – if they don't, you need more headings.
- ❑ **Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material**
 - You can shorten and clarify complex material by using lists and tables. These features give your document more white space, making it more appealing to the reader.
- ❑ **Uses no more than two or three sub-levels**
 - Readers get lost when you use more than two or three bulleted levels in a document. If you need more levels, consider different subdivisions, or using separate documents to convey all of the information.
- ❑ **Uses relevant, uncluttered images or diagrams**
 - Images and diagrams clarify the content of the document and do not include unnecessary information, lines, or words. Use good quality images.

Knowledge Translation Principles

- ❑ **Written for the reader**
 - Know the range of skills and expertise within your audience. If the range is too broad create different materials for different audiences. Consider universal health literacy precautions and accessibility standards when writing.
- ❑ **Organized to serve the reader's needs**
 - Organize your content in the order the reader needs it. Choose a logical structure such as putting the most important material first, or arranging things chronologically.
- ❑ **Uses accurate and evidence-based content**
 - Content reflects current best-practices and is well-supported by the research evidence. Content is context-specific, if appropriate.
- ❑ **The material is actionable, if appropriate**
 - Readers are told exactly what to do and why to do it.