

Quick Checklist for Plain Language

Center for Health Literacy | MAXIMUS
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This checklist will help you see if print and web materials are written in plain language and formatted in ways that help readers find and understand key messages. Check each item below that is present in the material. The more items with checks, the more likely it will be that readers can understand and use the material.

Reader focus

- The title and introduction tell what the material is about, whom it is for, and how to use it.
- The tone is direct, friendly, and positive, using personal pronouns such as “you” and “we.”
- The content is limited to what readers need to know, and anticipates their questions and concerns.

Organization

- The material begins with the most important message.
- The content is arranged in an order that makes sense to readers.
- Informative headings signal what’s coming and make it easy for readers to skim.

Writing

- The writing is mostly in the active voice.
- The words are common and familiar to the intended readers.
- Acronyms, abbreviations, technical terms, and legal terms are used **only** if readers need to know them. If used, they are explained.
- Paragraphs are one topic and brief, with simple and straightforward sentences.
- Key terms are used consistently.
- Instructions are brief, step-by-step, and placed right where readers need them.
- The writing is cohesive — making connections among ideas to help readers understand and absorb new information.

Design and formatting

- The material has similar style and structure throughout, with consistent use of fonts, italics, bold print, color, numbers, and bullets.
- The material **looks** inviting and easy to read, with an uncluttered layout, plenty of white space, and dark colored type on a light background.
- The fonts are clean in their design and easy to read (not fancy or unusual).
- The text size is large enough for easy reading and each line has about 10 to 15 words.
- Italics and bold print are used sparingly.
- Images are clear and uncluttered, related to the content, and culturally appropriate for the readers.

Tips for checking the language

- Take a careful look at the vocabulary.** Identify words you think readers would be unlikely to use in their everyday speech. Whenever possible, replace these words with others that would be easier and more familiar.
- Read it aloud or have someone read it to you.** You will hear if the tone is too formal, the wording is awkward, the sentences are too long, or the paragraphs too dense.

Turn over for more tips and resources ►►