Plain English checklist

Plain English is a style of writing that uses language, structure and presentation that readers can understand and act on by reading just once.

Review your writing against the items in this checklist, to see if you're writing plainly.

Read more about plain English by clicking here.

Big picture elements

The purpose of the document is clear at the start

The topic and main message of the document are obvious

The content supports the purpose of the document

The actions required of the reader are clear and obvious

The tone supports the purpose of the document

Structure elements

The structure of the document is clear and logical

The headings signal the key content

Lists and tables are used to simplify complex material and break up paragraphs

Lists are limited to two or three levels

Each paragraph starts by explaining its topic

Language elements

The paragraphs are mostly short and focus on one topic

The sentences are mostly short and straightforward

The words are precise and familiar

The document uses base verbs, not zombie nouns (nominalisations)

The document avoids ambiguous terms like 'shall' in favour of clear terms like 'must'

The writing speaks to the reader by using 'we' and 'you'

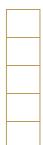The writing uses the active voice

The writing avoids using jargon, clichés and wordy phrases

The writing uses consistent terms throughout

Presentation elements

The pages look orderly

The layout and presentation help the reader absorb the message quickly and easily

The document is error-free and consistent with the style guide ☐

There is plenty of white space ☐

The print is big enough to read ☐