# Clear Writing Checklist

Use the following checklist to create clear, organized, and effective documents.

## In Your Document

- ☐ Identify a purpose and stick to it.
- ☐ Write for audience and purpose (and not for yourself or the topic).
- ☐ Organize content to meet your readers' needs.
- ☐ Select and focus on a limited number of key points (ideally 3 to 5).
- ☐ Select a limited number of supporting details (ideally 1 to 3) for each key point.
- ☐ Use a lot of useful, meaningful headings.
- ☐ Use emphasis (bold print or shading, for example) to highlight important concepts.
- ☐ Use terms consistently.
- ☐ Minimize your use of abbreviations and acronyms.
- ☐ Design the layout and structure for easy reading.
- ☐ Place one main message at or near the top, and emphasize it with bold and color.
- ☐ Add a visual image to support or reinforce the main message (and avoid merely decorative images).

## In Your Paragraphs

- ☐ Include only one topic in each paragraph.
- ☐ Use a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph, where possible.
- ☐ Use transitions to get from one paragraph to the next.
- ☐ Write short paragraphs (no more than 5 sentences or 7 lines per paragraph).
- ☐ Use examples where appropriate.
- ☐ Use bulleted and numbered lists to break up dense information and add white space.
- ☐ Use tables to make complex material easier to understand.

# In Your Sentences

- [ ] Make each sentence about one thing or serve one purpose.

- [ ] Use pronouns like "you" and "we" where appropriate to speak directly to readers.

- [ ] Use active voice (not passive voice).

- [ ] Make the action of each sentence clear through use of a clear, strong verb.

- [ ] Use the simplest form of verbs (e.g., "use" not "utilize").

- [ ] Avoid using hidden verbs (e.g., "analyze" not "conduct an analysis").

- [ ] Use "must" to indicate requirements (not "shall").

- [ ] Use contractions when appropriate.

- [ ] Don't use jargon or unnecessary technical terms.

- [ ] Use short, simple words.

- [ ] Don't cluster a bunch of nouns together.

- [ ] Omit unnecessary words.

- [ ] Don't use slashes.

- [ ] Write short sentences (no more than 20 words per sentence).

- [ ] Keep the subject and verb close together.

- [ ] Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions.

- [ ] Place modifiers next to the words they modify.

- [ ] Pay attention to what you placed at the end of each sentence (because readers tend to remember that).

# Supporting Information for Checklist

## In Your Document

### Identify a purpose

A clearly stated purpose helps create a focused document; all the separate pieces (pages, paragraphs, sections, images, etc.) can work together to achieve your specific goal.

### Write for your audience

Use language your audience knows and feels comfortable with. Take your audience's current level of knowledge into account. Address separate audiences separately. Remember to write for audience and purpose and not for topic and author (yourself). In other words, what does your audience need to know, not what do you want to say.

### Organize to meet your readers' needs

Start by stating the document's purpose and its bottom line. Put the most important information at the beginning and include background information (when necessary) toward the end. Eliminate filler and unnecessary content.

### Select key points and details

Short-term memory research demonstrates that, generally, people can process limited bits of information at a time. Mapping methods—such as "Message Mapping"—suggest selecting 1 to 3 main messages and including 1 to 3 supporting details for each of the main messages or key points. This helps ensure that your reader will easily process, understand, and remember your message.

### Use lots of useful headings

The best-organized document will still be difficult for users to follow if they can't see how it's organized. An effective way to reveal your document's organization is to use lots of useful headings. A document with lots of informative headings is easy to follow because the headings break up the material into logical, understandable pieces. Like Goldilocks's porridge, headings should be not too long, not too short, but just right (i.e., informative and meaningful).

### Use emphasis to highlight important concepts

Use **bold** or *italics* to make important concepts stand out. PUTTING EVERYTHING IN CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT A GOOD EMPHASIS TECHNIQUE; IT MAKES IT HARDER TO READ. AND IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION, IT'S CONSIDERED SHOUTING.

<u>Similarly, underlining will draw the user's attention to the section, but it makes it hard to read</u>. Besides, in electronic communication, people expect underlined text to be a link. It's better to use bold or italics for important issues.

## Use the same term consistently

You will confuse your audience if you use different terms for the same concept. For example, if you use the term "senior citizens" to refer to a group, continue to use this term throughout your document. Don't substitute another term, such as "the elderly" or "the aged."

## Minimize abbreviations and acronyms

Limit the number of abbreviations and acronyms you use in one document to no more than three. The following tips can help reduce acronyms and abbreviations:

- Use names such as "the committee" or "the report" in place of acronyms.
- If you use the abbreviation or acronym only a couple of times in a document, spell it out instead.

## Design your document for easy reading

Here are a couple of brief guidelines for good document design:

- Use lists and tables often but don't overuse them.
- Don't have lists within lists.
- Lists should have no more than about 7 items.
- Rather than fully justifying your text, use ragged right margins.

## Place a main message at the top

What is the one thing you want your reader to remember? This is your main message and should be placed at or near the top of your document. Emphasize it by bolding it and making the font larger. Maybe even put it in a shaded text box.

## Add a visual image to support the main message

Don't use images just to decorate your document. Carefully choose meaningful images that support or illustrate the main message or key points. And never use an image that shows behavior you want your reader to avoid or change. For example, if you want your reader to stay away from contaminated water, don't choose an image that shows kids playing near water (even if the water in the image looks clean).

# In Your Paragraphs

### Include only one topic in each paragraph

Your readers will understand more readily the point you want to make if you confine each paragraph to only one topic.

### Include a topic sentence in each paragraph

If you tell your readers what they're going to read about, they're less likely to have to read your paragraph again. Headings help, but they're not enough. Establish a context for your audience before you provide them with the details. We often write the way we think—we state our premises first and then our conclusions. It may be the natural way to develop our thoughts, but in so doing we wind up with the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph. Move that topic sentence to the beginning of the paragraph. Let readers know where you're going. Don't make readers hold a lot of information in their heads before they get to your point.

### Use transitions to get from one paragraph to the next

Think of your readers as all driving cars. They need signs and directions to help them get where you want them to go. Make sure they get those directions by linking paragraphs together through transition words and sentences. Transitions needn't be long and tedious. A transition can be as short as starting a succeeding paragraph with "but" or "still."

### Write short paragraphs and vary your sentence length

Long, wall-of-words paragraphs discourage your audience from even trying to understand your material. Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand. Writing experts recommend paragraphs of no more than 150 words or 5 sentences. Vary the lengths of your paragraphs to make them more interesting.

### Use examples

Examples help you clarify complex concepts. In spoken English, when you ask for clarification of something, people often respond by giving you an example. Good examples can substitute for long explanations. The more complex the concept you are writing about, the more you should consider using an example. And it's okay to say, "For example, …".

### Use lists

Lists highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way. Use vertical lists to help your user focus on important material. Vertical lists:

- Highlight levels of importance

- Help the user understand the order in which things happen

- Make it easy for the user to identify all necessary steps in a process

- Add blank space for easy reading

- Are an ideal way to present items, conditions, and exceptions

Your lists will be easier to read if you always use a lead-in sentence to explain your lists. Indent your lead-in sentence from the left margin and use left alignment only (never center justification). Keep lists short (no more than 7 bullets).

## Use tables to make complex material easier to understand

Tables help your audience see relationships that are often times hidden in dense text. Think about using a standard table or an "if-then" table.

# In Your Sentences

## Focus on one thing or purpose

Make sure that your sentence is about one thing. If you overload a sentence with more than one purpose, you are interfering with your readers' comprehension, and you are asking them to interpret which is the more important message or purpose. They may focus on something different than what you wanted to emphasize.

## Address one person, not a group

Your document may affect a thousand people, but you are speaking to the one person who is reading it.

## Use active voice

Active voice is clear, concise, and direct. Passive voice can be wordy and awkward; it can also disguise who does what. Use active voice unless you have a specific reason you want to use passive (e.g., you don't know who the actor was or you want to emphasize the action or object).

## Make the action clear

Sometimes when a reader can't decipher a sentence, it's because the action is unclear. What's happening or supposed to happen in the sentence? Make that clear through use of a strong, clear verb.

## Use the simplest form of a verb

The simplest and strongest form of a verb is present tense. Using the present tense makes your document more direct and forceful. Also, don't use a more complicated version of the verb. For example, say "use" instead of "utilize."

## Avoid hidden verbs

A hidden verb is a verb converted into a noun. It often needs an extra verb to make sense. Instead of "Please make an application for a personal loan," write "Please apply for a personal loan." Hidden verbs come in two forms. Some have endings such as -ment, -tion, -sion, and -ance or link with verbs such as achieve, effect, give, have, make, reach, and take. Often, you will find a hidden verb between the words "the" and "of."

## Use "must" to indicate requirements

The word "must" is the clearest way to convey to your audience that they have to do something. "Shall" is one of those officious and obsolete words that has encumbered legal, bureaucratic-like writing for many years. "Shall" is also obsolete. When was the last time you heard it used in everyday speech?

## Use contractions when appropriate

Contractions help make your writing less stuffy and more natural. Contractions also make your writing more accessible to the user. Research shows that contractions enhance readability; after all, people use contractions when they talk. So it's okay to use contractions, don't you think?

## Don't cluster nouns

Technical writing uses too many noun strings—groups of nouns "sandwiched" together. Readability suffers when three or more words that are ordinarily separate nouns follow in succession. Technically, clustering nouns turns all but the last noun into adjectives. However, many users will think they've found the noun when they're still reading adjectives, and will become confused. Eliminate descriptive words that aren't essential. Or, use prepositions and articles to clarify the relationships among the words.

## Use pronouns to speak directly to readers

Pronouns help the audience picture themselves in the text and relate better to your documents. Using "you" pulls users into your document and makes it relevant to them. Using "we" to refer to your agency makes your agency more approachable. It also makes your sentences shorter and your document easier to read.

## Don't use jargon

Be concise—leave out unnecessary words. Don't use jargon or technical terms when everyday words have the same meaning. Use words and terms consistently throughout your document.

## Use short, simple words

Vocabulary choice is an important part of communicating clearly. Be expressive, but remember that most federal writing has no place for literary flair. It's not going to be someone's fireside reading. In making your word choices, pick the familiar or frequently used word over the unusual or obscure. As George Orwell said, "Never use a long word where a short one will do."

## Omit unnecessary words

Don't confuse your readers with long, complex sentences containing multiple phrases and clauses. One place to start working on this problem in your own writing is to watch out for "of," "to," "on," and other prepositions. You can also omit redundant words and avoid doublets and triplets (i.e., when authors repeat the same concept by using different words that say the same thing—such as "knowledge and information"). In other words, if it's possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

## Don't use slashes

Apart from fractions, the slash has almost no good uses. "And/or" is a classic example. In most cases, writers mean either "or" or "and." But they don't want to take the time to decide which they mean, so they push the job off on the audience. That makes their writing ambiguous. As an author, you should decide what you mean. In the few cases—and there do seem to be very few—where you truly mean both, write out "either X, or Y, or both." Often when writers use slashes, a hyphen is more appropriate to join equal or like terms, as in "faculty-student ratio."

## Write short sentences

Express only one idea in each sentence. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't sure about what you want to say. No sentence should exceed 25 words. Shorter sentences are also better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units. Sentences loaded with dependent clauses and exceptions confuse the audience by losing the main point in a forest of words. Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence; break up your idea into its parts, and make each one the subject of its own sentence. Vary your sentence length to make your text more interesting to the reader. That's what Hemingway did—no reason why you can't do the same.

## Keep subject, verb, and object close together

The natural word order of an English sentence is subject-verb-object. This is how you first learned to write sentences, and it's still the best way. When you put modifiers, phrases, or clauses between two or all three of these essential parts, you make it harder for your readers to understand you.

## Place the main idea before exceptions and conditions

When you start a sentence with an introductory phrase or clause beginning with "except," you almost certainly force the reader to re-read your sentence. You are stating an exception to a rule before you have stated the underlying rule. The audience must absorb the exception, then the rule, and then usually has to go back to grasp the relationship between the two. Material is much easier to follow if you start with the main idea and then cover exceptions and conditions.

## Place words carefully

Sloppy word placement can cause ambiguity. To reduce ambiguity, put conditionals such as "only" or "always" and other modifiers next to the words they modify. Write "you are required to provide only the following," not "you are only required to provide the following."

## Pay attention to what comes last

Some researchers have found that readers tend to remember or give emphasis to what comes at the end of a sentence (see Gopen reference below). Pay attention to what you place at the end of sentence. Is that what you want readers to remember as they move to next sentence?

## References

The NCEH/ATSDR Office of Communication, Writer-Editor Services, developed this checklist and supporting materials using the following sources:

- Federal Plain Language Guidelines (available at **www.plainlanguage.gov**)

- Message Mapping, Vincent T. Covello, PhD (available at **http://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Content/activeinformation/resources/Covello_message_mapping.pdf**)

- The Science of Scientific Writing, George Gopen and Judith Swan (available at **http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/feature/the-science-of-scientific-writing/1**)