

A Checklist to Review Documents

Plain 
Language
Audit Tool

Do your documents use plain language guidelines?

Can the audience read, understand, and use the documents you produce?

The NWT Literacy Council wrote and produced this document. The Department of Education, Culture, and Employment, Government of the Northwest Territories funded the project.

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The project also produced **Write for Your Reader**—a ‘how to’ plain language handbook.

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If you have questions about plain language or this handbook, contact the NWT Literacy Council.

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The NWT Literacy Council offers plain language services.

- Edit your documents with plain language.
- Assess documents for plain language.
- Provide literacy profiles to help you understand the readers' needs.

Plain Language Audit Tool

Can people read, understand, and use the public information you produce and distribute?

This audit tool shows that a plain language audit is important, easy to do, and worthwhile.

- What is a plain language audit?
- Who should do a plain language audit?
- Why should you do a plain language audit?
- How do you do a plain language audit?

After you do the audit, use the knowledge you have gained.

- Things to think about before you apply plain language guidelines to edit your documents.
- Be a plain language advocate.

What is a plain language audit?

A plain language audit shows if a document(s) uses plain language guidelines. It features:

- A checklist of plain language guidelines to show which guidelines are present and which are absent in the document(s).
- A readability test to show the grade reading level a person should have to read, understand, and use the information in the document(s).

Plain language is writing for your readers. Plain language applies writing and design guidelines that help people read, understand, and use written information.

Who should do a plain language audit?

Everyone who produces or distributes information for the public should do a plain language audit for those documents.

Expect to spend an hour or two, depending on the number and length of your documents. Anyone can do it and it is well worth the effort.

Why do a plain language audit?

We all have a responsibility to produce written information that people can read, understand, and use. A plain language audit can help identify documents that should be edited using plain language guidelines.

Government, business, and non-profit groups produce and use many documents:

- Forms and applications—income support, jobs, funding, legal aid, licences, housing.
- Reports—land use or economic plans, strategies, environmental assessments, discussion papers.
- Legal documents—land claims, insurance, child custody, impact benefit agreements, contracts, adoption, sentencing.
- Brochures and booklets—health and social services, education, sports and fitness, employment, housing, daycare.
- Instructions and manuals—workplace health and safety, hazardous waste, elections, firearms safety, prescriptions.
- Internal documents—briefing notes, decision papers, reports, meeting minutes, policies.
- Letters and memos.

Government, business, and non-profit groups use these documents to:

- Give people information.
- Change peoples' behaviour or thinking.
- Help people make decisions.
- Consult with people.
- Register people for programs or services.

People are often confused, ask a lot of questions, fill out forms incorrectly, skip information, or just don't read the information they get.

People need to be able to read, understand, and use written information to participate fully in society.

How to do a plain language audit?

There are four simple steps to this audit:

1. Pick one document or group of documents.
2. Use the checklist to identify which plain language guidelines are present and which are absent in the document(s).
3. Do a readability test.
4. Identify document(s) that need a plain language edit.

Step 1: Pick one document or a group of documents



Do a plain language audit on documents that already exist. We suggest you quickly read through the document(s) before you do the checklist in Step 2.

Do a plain language audit on one document or on many documents at the same time. You may have several types of documents about the same topic or program.

- Brochure
- Booklet
- Application form
- Letter
- Poster

If you have a group of documents about one topic, it is helpful to audit the group together.

Step 2: Check which plain language guidelines are present and which are absent in the document(s)



Copy the checklist and use it to assess the document(s). Use one form for each document if you are doing a group of documents.

- Fill in the top of the form.
- Read each guideline and go through your document. Check Yes, No, or Does Not Apply (N/A) to show how each plain language guideline applies to your document.
- Make notes at the bottom as needed.

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Document title:

Audience:

Purpose:

Type of document:

Date:

Guideline	Yes	No	N/A
Purpose is clear. Readers know right away what the document is about.			
Readers have good information about how the document is organized.			
Ideas are presented in logical order that makes sense to the readers.			
Document is divided into short sections, with headings and subheadings.			
Most important info at the start of the document and each section.			
Only essential info is included; extra information left out.			
Document respects gender, culture, and other differences.			

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Guideline	Yes	No	N/A
Words are short, simple, and clear; common words with no jargon.			
Technical terms are defined or left out.			
Acronyms are defined or left out.			
Sentences are short; 20 to 25 words or less. Each has just one idea.			
Tone is positive. Write “policies are valid if ...” not “no policy is valid unless ...”			
Writing style is active, not passive. Write “they decided ...” not “a decision was made ...”			
Paragraphs are short. Each has just one idea.			
Instructions are presented in the correct order if appropriate.			
Point form or bullet lists are used if appropriate.			
Paragraphs and sections have white space between them.			
Left margin is justified; right margin is ragged.			

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Guideline	Yes	No	N/A
Main text is at least 12 point.			
Headings and subheadings are different size and font than the main text.			
Total width of main text is within the 10 to 15 cm (4 to 6 inches) range.			
Good contrast between type colour and paper colour.			
Design features help readers find the information they need.			
Photos, graphs, or other design features break up text and make information clearer.			

Notes:

Step 3: Do a readability test



A readability test shows what grade reading level a person needs to have to be able to read, understand, and use the information in your document.

Experts agree on this general guideline about what grade reading level to aim for in public documents.

If the document is ...	Aim for ...
Essential information for people who have less than 8 years of school or whose first language is not English	Grade 5 to 6
Public information that has new terms and concepts or specialized subject matter.	Grade 7 to 8
Specialized information for people who are familiar with the topic and who have good literacy skills.	Grade 10 +

Online readability tests are easy to use and free. Here are two examples.

- Readability—Score.com
<https://readability-score.com/> (November 2015)
- Readability Test Tool
<http://read-able.com/> (November 2015)

Microsoft Word also measures grade-reading level. Check online to set this up for your version of Word.

Things to think about before you edit documents in plain language

Identify the number and type(s) of documents you need to communicate the message.

- How many documents do you need to communicate the message? Should you combine information to make fewer documents? Does it make sense to take apart the information and have more?
- What type of document will communicate your message best?

Would a poster be better than a brochure?

Would a summary be more useful than a full report?

If you have a group of documents, make sure they use terms consistently. Words should mean the same thing in each document.

Identify a person and a schedule to do the edit.

Learn about plain language writing. Use the handbook **Write for Your Reader** to help you.

Be a plain language advocate

- Apply plain language guidelines when you write new documents.
- Organize plain language training for people who write public documents.
- Encourage your agency or government department to develop a plan to apply plain language guidelines to all public documents.

