# Clear Writing Assessment

We all want our information to be easy to understand. Use this assessment tool to test if your materials are clear.

> **How to Use This Tool**
> Before you use this tool for the first time, read the User Guide. It explains why these strategies are important and gives you additional writing tips to improve the writing quality of your document. You can use this tool to assess entire documents or to test sections in long documents. Read and answer the questions. Skip any question that doesn't apply to your document (this won't affect your score).

## Audience and Purpose

### Audience

1. Did you identify your intended audience and write to that audience? For example, would your audience understand your content? And did you ask or anticipate what information your audience needs or wants?  Yes = 1    No = 0

2. Did you consider how your audience may respond emotionally to what you've written? For example, are you giving your audience good news or bad news, and did you phrase messages to sound helpful?  Yes = 1    No = 0

3. Did you use the best method (website, presentation, online pdf, social media, print, etc.) to convey your message?  Yes = 1    No = 0

### Purpose

4. Did you clearly explain this document's purpose early in the document? For example, did you include a short main message at or near the top of the document (or at the top of each chapter in long documents)?  Yes = 1    No = 0

5. Did you include a call to action for your audience and make it easy to find? A prompt to get more information, a request to share information with someone else, or a recommendation for a behavior change are all examples of a call to action.  Yes = 1    No = 0

# Formatting

## Structure

6. Did you organize the document? An effective way to organize information is by order of importance to the reader: most important first, least important last. Other ways to organize include chronological order or sequential order. Did you organize or structure your information in a specific, deliberate manner?    Yes = 1    No = 0

7. Did you left-justify your text? Left-justified text is aligned down the left side and 'ragged' down the right side. Left-justified text is easier to read than centered or fully justified text, which create some spacing oddities.    Yes = 1    No = 0

## Headings

8. If you used Q&A format headings, did they address questions your intended audience would ask?    Yes = 1    No = 0

9. Can your audience scan your headings and have a clear idea of what's included in the paragraphs below them?    Yes = 1    No = 0

10. Did you use clearly visible headings or subheadings every 1 to 3 paragraphs? Headings should stand out visually (bold, larger font, or other formatting).    Yes = 1    No = 0

11. Did you use more space before and less space after each heading so it's clear how your content is chunked? For example, look at the heading "Lists" just a few lines below. Notice how there is more space above it and less below it. That's a visual queue that questions 12 – 14 below are chunked or associated with the heading "Lists."    Yes = 1    No = 0

## Lists

12. Did you set up your lists with a lead-in sentence? The bullets or numbers should logically follow the content of the lead-in sentence.    Yes = 1    No = 0

13. Are all your bulleted or numbered lists short? Bulleted lists should have fewer than 7 items of equal importance. Numbered lists may be a bit longer if they present steps, actions, instructions, or a "top 10" style list.    Yes = 1    No = 0

14. Are your bulleted lists in parallel form? For example, is the first word a verb for each item? Are they all fragments or complete sentences?    Yes = 1    No = 0

## Emphasis

15. Did you avoid using ALL CAPS (because they are hard to read)?    Yes = 1    No = 0

16. Did you avoid using underlining for emphasis? Underlines tend to make people think the information is a link. Use bold instead of underlining.    Yes = 1    No = 0

## Writing

17. Do your sentences have about 20 words or fewer?                                                          Yes = 1          No = 0

18. Do the paragraphs have 5 short sentences or fewer? If you think your document will be viewed primarily on a mobile device like a phone or tablet, keep your paragraphs to 4 short sentences or fewer.          Yes = 1          No = 0

19. Did you mostly use active voice (except for "methods" sections or other special circumstances the user guide describes)?          Yes = 1          No = 0

20. Did you use pronouns like "you" and "we" to sound conversational and speak directly to the reader?          Yes = 1          No = 0

21. Did you remove "hidden verbs" (nominalizations)? For example, say "we will determine" instead of "we will make a determination."          Yes = 1          No = 0

22. Did you place the subject and verb within 4 words of each other in all sentences?          Yes = 1          No = 0

23. Did you explain in plain language any technical terms that your audience may not know? Beware of jargon that your intended audience may not understand. Use CDC's Everyday Words and the Environmental Health Plain Language Thesaurus if you need help finding plain language explanations.          Yes = 1          No = 0

24. Did you include visuals (such as tables, charts, pictures) to explain text-heavy details that a visual could more easily convey, and did you include an explanation of those visuals?          Yes = 1          No = 0

## Calculate Your Score

This PDF should automatically calculate the score for you, based on how you answered the questions above. If you need to manually calculate your score, divide the number of points you earned by the number of questions you answered. Then, multiply that number by 100.

_____ (points earned)  ÷  _____ (questions answered)  **x 100 =** _____

👍 If your score is **85 or above**, excellent! You used many of the most important clear writing practices.

👎 If your score is **84.9 or below**, you need to revise. Look at the score sheet to see what you need to improve. Use the User Guide for help too.

# Clear Writing Assessment (CWA) User Guide

The CWA is a tool to test if your materials are clearly written. This CWA User Guide

- Provides practical tips to improve the writing quality of your messages and materials.
- Explains the questions in the CWA and offers tips to make testing easier.
- Provides references for the CWA and User Guide.

## Table of Contents

## General Writing Tips

Use these tips to improve the quality of your writing.

### Is the document as short as it can be?

The more you write, the less they'll read. Include information that is essential to your communication objective; leave everything else out. Omit needless words, sentences, and paragraphs so you can communicate more concepts in less time and space.

Use these tips to help shorten your documents:

- Identifying the purpose of a document before you begin writing helps create a strong balance between conciseness and clarity. It helps you think in one single direction and stay relevant to your topic.
- Editing after writing will help you shorten you document too. Treat your words like replaceable commodities. They're good only if they add meaning to your copy. If not, remove or replace them.
- Repeating yourself makes documents long and dampens originality. Say what you want to say once, and say it meaningfully.

> **Example of Wordiness**
> **Before**: Because of the fact that people benefited from reading my article, I decided to follow up with another.
> **After**:    Because people benefited from reading my article, I wrote a follow-up.

Also, look for and delete the following to tighten up your writing:

- Unnecessary background information
- Unnecessary descriptions and adjectives (e.g., call it "a set of guide sheets" instead of "a comprehensive collection of instructional guidance materials")
- Content that doesn't apply to the intended audience or support the purpose of the document

**TIP**: Be concise when drafting your document. Then walk away for a day. Come back with a fresh look and cut another 10% or more. It can almost always be shorter.

## Did you write the document so your intended audience can easily understand and remember it?

Sometimes, we have the habit of trying to impress our readers with academic-sounding or complicated sentences instead of focusing on how to make our message as clear as possible. People are more apt to follow you if you use words they can understand ("use" instead of "utilize"). Be expressive, but remember that most public health writing is no place for literary flair—it's not going to be someone's fireside reading. As George Orwell said, "Never use a long word where a short one will do." And avoid complicated grammar structures with lots of clauses and punctuation. Instead, follow a simple subject-verb-object sentence structure.

### Write like you speak (when appropriate).
One of the biggest obstacles on the journey to natural writing is your education. Smart, highly educated people have a hard time giving themselves permission to write less formally. Formal writing leaves just a tiny space for your voice, but writing like you talk reveals your voice and brings your words to life.

The problem with writing like you speak, however, is that in informal, improvised conversation, you don't pay close attention to important features of clear writing, like grammar and word choice. Therefore, the goal isn't to write like you talk informally; the goal is to craft a piece of writing that doesn't sound like writing, but like a conversation with your reader.

### Write for one person in your audience.
Writing for one person helps you write more conversationally. Writing to the dark or to a faceless crowd makes you sound formal, impersonal, and boring. Talk to one particular person and make it a conversation. And it's ok to use "you."

### Use contractions in your writing.
Depending on your audience and the purpose for your writing, using contractions is one of the best ways to catch and keep your readers' attention. When readers see a contraction, almost instantaneously they let their eyes go back to the contraction. It also makes your writing less intimidating, which is particularly important if you're writing to an audience with low literacy or health literacy skills.

### Read aloud.
Try reading what you've written aloud. If it flows, then you've accomplished your mission of writing conversationally. If at any time you stumble as you're reading your work, then it may not be flowing. Even better, ask someone else to read it aloud to you. It will be even easier to hear the flow (or lack of flow).

**TIP:** Check out the Government Training in Plain Language webpage to build your clear writing skills.

# Audience and Purpose

The following helps explain questions 1 – 5 in the Clear Writing Assessment.

### 1. Did you identify your intended audience and write to that audience?

Before you even begin to write, answer these questions about your audience:
- Who are you writing to?
- What do they want to know?
- What will they do with the information?
- What do you know about them (e.g., age, health status, socioeconomics, demographics, culture, literacy and health literacy skills)?

If you don't know, ask or do research. Explore these resources to help define your audience and gather information that will help you decide how to best communicate with them:
- Pink Book: Making Health Communication Programs Work
- Health Literacy Online: Learn about Your Users and Their Goals
- Gateway to Health Communication
- The Health Literacy of America's Adults

Also, remember that you shouldn't use "general public" as an intended audience. That's too broad. When you try to reach everyone, you run the risk of not reaching anyone. Be specific about your audience so you can write messages that match what the audience can comprehend and use.

When you draft your messages or materials, use audience information as a guide about what to include, what to explain, what type of examples or stories to use, what tone or approach is best, and other communication considerations.

### 2. Did you consider how your audience may respond emotionally to what you've written?

Emotions can influence the way readers interact with messages and materials. For example, strong emotional responses can reduce reading comprehension or influence decisions. Your messages or materials may trigger negative emotional responses, especially if the information conflicts with the reader's beliefs or current knowledge. Look closely at your material and assess if the topic or tone may prompt strong emotions that could affect reader's ability to understand or accept the messages.

Also remember that poorly written or poorly organized materials can provoke negative emotions. Readers can get frustrated if they don't understand what you're trying to say. For example, don't use scientific jargon or an academic style of writing in a fact sheet or web content intended for a lay audience. Strive to be direct and clear with your messages to avoid reader frustration and other negative emotions. Try to phrase messages in a positive manner. Express empathy or understanding if you anticipate negative emotions.

### 3. Did you use the best method (website, presentation, social media, print, etc.) to convey your message?

Did you determine how your material will be formatted and distributed so that it reaches your audience? Consider how your audience will find, receive, and use the material. Choose the best format for your audience and the message (written, visual, audio, video). Identify dissemination channels, such as social media, community

organizations, websites, and activities that match the audience. If you aren't sure about the best method to use, ask. Find a few representatives of your intended audience and ask them.

### 4. Did you clearly explain this document's purpose early in the document?

Before you start to write, you should not only identify your intended audience but also determine the purpose of the document. What do you want your reader to do, know, feel, or think after they read your material? Write for that audience and purpose. If it's not relevant to your intended audience and if it doesn't advance the purpose, leave it out.

Also think about encapsulating that purpose in a main message. People look for the most important information at the top, beginning, or front of a material. When you put the main message first, people can find it more easily and quickly. For example, a main message belongs at the top of a webpage or poster and on the front page of a folded brochure. The main message must be in the first paragraph or section. A section is a block of text between headings. For a webpage, the first section must be fully visible without scrolling.

When someone reads that main message or purpose early in the document, they understand how to interpret the rest of the messaging. For example, let's say you wrote a fact sheet for parents who live in an area with lead contamination in the water. Your purpose may be to encourage parents to get their kids' blood tested for lead. So, a main message, at the top of the fact sheet may be something like this: "Some children in Springfield have high levels of lead in their blood. This can cause health problems. Children living in this area should have routine blood tests." Everything else they read in the fact sheet will reinforce this main message and help accomplish the purpose of the fact sheet.

### 5. Did you include a call to action and make it easy to find?

Tell the primary audience what you want them to do with the information you've given them. The action can be a specific behavior, a prompt to get more information, a request to share information with someone else, or a broad call for change.

Even when your purpose is to inform an audience, think about why they need this information, and use this insight to create a call to action.

Examples:
- If you plan to go to work after pregnancy, a lactation counselor can help you plan to keep providing breastmilk for your baby while you are away. Get more information about pumping and storing your breast milk and your rights at work.
- Science must continue to guide global HIV treatment and prevention efforts. Public health professionals should select HIV treatment and prevention strategies that are evidence-based.
- Use a portable air cleaner with a high-efficiency (HEPA) air-cleaning filter.

# Formatting

The following helps explain questions 6 – 16 in the Clear Writing Assessment.

### 6.  Did you organize the document?

Organization is key for clear writing. People seek out patterns to help make sense of information. When readers can't find a pattern that makes sense, or if they have to double back to understand it, they'll stop reading. Respect the natural order of things. If you're giving your reader a list of steps, present them in the order they need doing. But if the items in your list aren't steps, they often still have a natural order—like most important (to the reader) to least important.

Since today's readers tend to skim, obvious organization will make skimming easier. The specific pattern you choose depends upon the topic and your objectives. Think carefully about which pattern makes the most sense in helping the reader understand and remember the information.

Order of importance (to the reader) is one of the best ways to organize, but here are some others that work too:

- **Chronological**: Appropriate for news stories, history articles, and explanations of development or change
- **Sequential**: Arranged according to a specific series of steps in a particular order
- **Problem/Solution**: Two main sections, one describing a problem and one describing a solution
- **Advantages/Disadvantages**: Information divided into pros and cons so the reader can weigh both sides
- **Topical Pattern**: Different subtopics within a larger topic

### 7.  Did you left-justify your text?

Left-justified text is aligned down the left side and "ragged" down the right side (like the text in this document.) This alignment creates natural spacing between words and is easier to read. Fully justified text is aligned down the left and right sides, creating awkward, distracting spacing between words. Centered text is also hard to read because the starting point changes for each line.

### 8.  If you used Q&A format headings, did they address questions your intended audience would ask?

Question headings are useful in content that serves as an informational resource, such as an instructional procedure, a troubleshooting guide, or a website's FAQ page. But question headings are only useful if you know what questions your audience will ask. Most people come to government documents with questions. If you know those questions, use them as headings to help the audience scan the document and find specific information.

Questions can also serve to organize more qualitative information intended to expand readers' knowledge. A question is an invitation to participate in a conversation. It immediately draws readers in, moving them from passive to active reading. Of course, it has to be something people care about—your target audience needs to want the answer.

Never ask a question that anyone could easily answer. If your heading addresses a question that most people already know the answer to, they probably won't be interested. Never use a question heading that can be answered with a single word or phrase. When using questions as headings, use "I" and "me" to reflect the voice of the user.

TIP: The easiest way to find out is to talk to some members of your intended audience. Don't assume you know.

### 9. Can your audience scan your headings and have a clear idea of what's included in the paragraphs below?

Think of headings a bit like topic sentences—a sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph. Make sure that the heading sets up the content that will follow. For example, if you have a paragraph or two discussing different ways that people are exposed to toxic substances, then the heading should be something like "Sources of Toxic Exposure" to let readers know what they'll be reading next. In essence, make sure your headings match or connect to the content underneath them.

### 10. Did you use clearly visible headings or subheadings every 1-3 paragraphs?

Giant blocks of text without headings make your document appear complicated, intimidate low-literacy readers, and even deter high-literacy readers. It's a good idea to break up your document with headers every 1 to 3 paragraphs.

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. Using lots of headings can also make your document more visually appealing by increasing white space. Headings should be meaningful, visually distinct, and an appropriate length:

- **Meaningful**: Use specific headings that let readers know what comes next. For example, instead of "Overview" use "CDC Study Looks at Lead Contamination." Instead of "Recommendations" use "CDC Recommends You Test Your Well Water."
- **Visually Distinct**: Headings should be bold and larger font than the text that follows. Consider color too.
- **Appropriate Length**: Headings should generally be about 8 words or less; however, FAQ headings can be a bit longer (i.e., up to about 15 words).

### 11. Did you use more space before and less space after each heading so it's clear how your content is chunked?

Make sure your headings don't "float" on the page (floating happens when there's too much white space above and below the heading). Make it clear which chunk of text the heading corresponds to (see image below).

Just a little space between the heading and corresponding text.

More space here to show that we are moving to another heading and text.

> **Testing Your Materials**
> Testing helps make sure that your final product will be useful for your readers. Here are some easy recommendations for informal testing.
>
> **Why do I need to test my material?**
> When it comes to understanding your material, your readers are the experts. Testing your material with the target audience can improve your readers' satisfaction and increase their trust in your material.
>
> **What type of testing is right for me?**
> There are lots of options to test your material with your audience,

## 12. Did you set up your lists with a lead-in sentence?

Bullets should logically follow the content of a lead-in sentence. Look at the example below. The lead-in sentence is about keeping physical distance. But none of the bullets that follow are about physical distance.

**Bad Example:** The following lead-in sentence does **NOT** set up the bulleted list.

Keep Physical Distance Between You and Others
- Wear a face mask.
- When you return home, remove the mask carefully.
- Wash your hands and wash the mask.
- Continue to follow everyday health habits.

How can you fix this? You need to either write a new lead-in sentence. Or, in this case, see if you can reorder the bullets to make more logical sense.

**Good Example:** The lead-in sentence now sets up the bulleted list.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, follow these healthy habits:
- Wear a face mask.
- When you return home, remove your mask carefully.
- Wash your hands and wash the mask.
- Keep physical distance between you and others.

## 13. Are all your bulleted or numbered lists short?

Bulleted lists are a great way to call attention to listed information—but when they're too long, they lose this effect and instead become tedious and distracting. Keep bulleted lists short and sweet: no more than seven items maximum. This is based on short-term memory research about how much information most people can process at a time ("The Magical Number Seven…" by George Miller).

These additional tips will help you create effective lists:
- Use a lead-in sentence to explain your lists and indent your bulleted items.
- Punctuate bullets according to the grammatical structure. If the bullet is a complete sentence, place a period at its end. Words and phrases need no ending punctuation.
- Use bullet symbols if you have a list of items of equal importance. Use numbers for items with different degrees of value or for steps in a process.
- Avoid bulleted lists with sub-bullets and sub-sub-bullets. That's a wall of words with dots that's busy and hard to read.

TIP: Don't place the word "and" before the last item in a bulleted list (M. Strumpf and A. Douglas, The Grammar Bible, 2004).

## 14. Are the bulleted lists written in parallel form?

Each item in your list should be parallel—structured the same way. For example, if the first bulleted item is a complete sentence, then all other bulleted items should also be complete sentences. If the first is a sentence fragment, the rest should be fragments.

All items should start with the same part of speech too. For example, if your first bullet point starts with an "-ing" verb, then all of the bullet points need to start with an "-ing" verb.  If the first one starts with a noun, then all the rest need to start with a noun. Look at the examples below.

Bad Example: This list is **NOT** parallel.

Those at higher risk for severe illness include the following:
- Elderly
- People who have severe underlying medical conditions
- If you are immunocompromised

Good Example: This list is parallel.

Those at higher risk for severe illness include the following:
- People who are 65 and older
- People who have severe underlying medical conditions
- People who are immunocompromised

## 15. Did you avoid using ALL CAPS?

ALL CAPS are harder to read for people with visual impairments and for people who struggle with reading comprehension. Most people learned to read with sentence case (i.e., where the first word in the sentence is upper case and all other words are lower case unless they are proper nouns). This is the most familiar pattern for low-literacy readers and the easiest for them to process.

Also, in electronic media (such as email), ALL CAPS have come to indicate shouting. It's best to avoid this misinterpretation of tone by avoiding ALL CAPS.

## 16. Did you avoid using underlining for emphasis?

Underlining makes text look busy and should be used only to indicate a hyperlink. Italics can be hard to read and should be used sparingly (e.g., titles of works, foreign words, species name, and single-word emphasis like only). It's best to use bold (and sometimes color, also sparingly).

Bold font is an easy way to call attention to text, but use it sparingly. Using bold font too frequently gives you nowhere to go when you need to emphasize a word. Avoid using all caps. It reads as if you are shouting at your audience.

# Writing

The following helps explain questions 17 – 24 in the Clear Writing Assessment.

## 17. Do your sentences have about 20 words or fewer?

Long sentences are hard to read and remember. The main point can get lost in a forest of words. Short sentences are easier to skim, so readers are less likely to miss what is most important.

It's okay if you occasionally have a sentence that is 26 or 28 words, but generally keep your sentences to 20 words or fewer. Also, vary your sentence length (e.g., a 10-word sentence, followed by a 22-word sentence, followed by a 14-word sentence). Your writing will sound monotonous if all the sentences are around 20 words long.

TIP: Some software* highlights long sentences so you don't have to manually count each of them (e.g., StyleWriter, Visible Thread, Hemingway Editor).

## 18. Do the paragraphs have 5 short sentences or fewer?

Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand. Long paragraphs that end up creating a "wall of words" can keep your audience from even trying to understand your material. Short paragraphs also increase the white space in your document, making it less intimidating. Limit each paragraph to a single topic. Write short paragraphs that vary in length.

TIP: If readers will view your document primarily on a mobile device, limit your paragraphs to 4 sentences or fewer. Because mobile screens are smaller, paragraphs will wrap around more and look longer.

## 19. Did you mostly use active voice?

First, make sure you understand the difference between active and passive voice.
- A verb is in the **active voice** when the performer of the act is the subject of the sentence—when the subject is doing the action in the verb. For example, "CDC wrote the report."
- A verb is in the **passive voice** when the receiver of the act is the subject of the sentence. For example, "The report was written by CDC."

Passive voice is formed by using some form of "to be" (i.e., am, is, are, was, were, has been) with the past participle of a verb:
- The filing deadline **was** unintentionally **missed**.  ("was" and "missed")
- The review of all positions **has been completed** by HR. ("has been" and "completed")

Most writing manuals recommend active voice instead of passive voice—because it's clear, concise, and direct. The easiest structure to understand in English is subject → verb → object, which is active voice. As a rule, active voice is more accurate, more precise, and less wordy than passive voice. It's also easier to understand because it sounds closer to the way we talk.

Passive:    The brakes were slammed on by her as the car sped downhill.
Active:      She slammed on the brakes as the car sped downhill.

In some circumstances, you may choose to use passive voice instead:

- **When the subject is unknown**
  Example: A memo was circulated in the office. (You don't know who circulated it.)

- **When the subject is irrelevant**
  Example: The samples were being analyzed. (The analysis is important—not who is analyzing.)

TIP: Use MS Word to calculate the percentage of passive sentences in your document. Try to keep passive voice down to 15% or less of your document.

## 20. Did you use pronouns like "you" and "we" to sound conversational and speak directly to the reader?

Even though your document may affect a thousand or a million people, you are speaking to the one person who is reading it. When your writing reflects this, it's more economical and has a greater impact.

Pronouns help the audience picture themselves in the text and relate to what you're saying. More than any other single technique, using "you" pulls users into the information and makes it relevant to them. When you use "you" to address users, they are more likely to understand what their responsibility is.

Using "we" makes your agency more approachable and also helps you use fewer words. Just be sure to define who "we" is somewhere in the document so it's clear to the user.


## 21. Did you remove "hidden verbs" (nominalizations)?

A nominalization is a noun created from another form of speech, such as a verb or adjective. The Federal Plain Language Guidelines liken nominalizations to "hidden verbs." Hidden verbs tend to weaken sentences by introducing more words than readers need.

Here's what happens. Sometimes, to sound more academic, we take the verb (action) in our sentence and change it into a noun (a thing). We do this by adding endings such as *-ment, -tion, -sion,* and *–ance.* For example, we take a verb like "assist" and turn it into the noun "assistance," or we turn the verb "conclude" into the noun "conclusion." Then we have to add another verb to the sentence so that it makes sense.

For example, "We concluded" becomes "We came to the conclusion" and "We assisted" becomes "We provided assistance." "Please make an application for a personal loan," is longer and less clear than "Please apply for a personal loan."

Uncovering the hidden verb usually forces you to rephrase your sentence and cut out other poor habits such as wordy phrases. As these examples show, one way to cut the clutter in our writing is to recover any hidden verbs:

Wordy: The slider allows you to *make an adjustment to* the volume.
Revised: The slider allows you to *adjust* the volume.

Wordy: After *conducting a review of* your notes, *perform an analysis of* past quizzes to identify trouble spots.
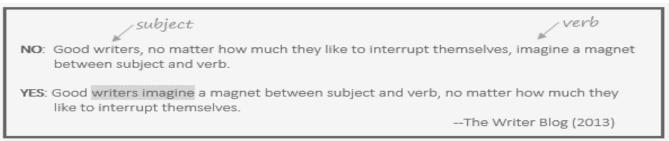Revised: After *reviewing* your notes, *analyze* past quizzes to identify trouble spots.

Wordy: Bob *made an announcement* that the new policy will *have an immediate implementation date*.
Revised: Bob *announced* that the new policy will *be implemented immediately*."

TIP: Software* such as Visible Thread, StyleWriter, MSWord, or ProWritingAid can check for nominalizations.


## 22. Did you place the subject and verb within 4 words of each other in all sentences?

Because the natural order of an English sentence is subject-verb-object, readers expect the verb (action) in a sentence to be near the subject. Keeping the subject and verb close together adds clarity to your writing.

Some authors tend to insert a lot of text that describes the subject between the subject and verb. Or they interrupt the sentence with a long phrase or clause (see below).



**NO**: Good writers, no matter how much they like to interrupt themselves, imagine a magnet between subject and verb.

**YES**: Good writers imagine a magnet between subject and verb, no matter how much they like to interrupt themselves.

--The Writer Blog (2013)

When several words or phrases come between subjects and verbs, readers may forget what the subject is and have to reread the sentence. This can be especially confusing if the extra words include other verbs. Remember: when rereading is necessary, writing is not clear enough.

### Can you follow this long, convoluted sentence?

If any member of the board retires, the company, at the discretion of the board, and after notice from the chairman of the board to all the members of the board at least 30 days before executing this option, may buy, and the retiring member must sell, the member's interest in the company.

In essence, the sentence says: **The company may buy a retiring member's interest.** All the rest of the material modifies the basic idea and should be moved to another sentence or at least to the end of the sentence.

TIP: Check wordy sentences to be sure the subject and verb are close together. Find the verb first and ask "who" or "what" does the action in the verb. If you have trouble finding these parts of the sentence, there may be too many words between them.

### 23. Did you explain in plain language any technical terms that your audience may not know?

Before you start writing, consider who will use the information and their reading level. Use words your audience will understand. Even readers familiar with the specialized language you use might better grasp simpler phrasing. Write so that someone just starting in the profession will be able to understand your report.

When you need to explain a specialized term, the most direct way is to define it on first use. You can also give examples and include further explanations.

For example: "Infectious" diseases mean illnesses caused by germs (bacteria, viruses, and fungi) that enter the body, multiply, and can cause an infection.

- Some infectious diseases are contagious (or communicable), that is, spread from one person to another.
- Other infectious diseases can be spread by germs carried in air, water, food, or soil. They can also be spread by vectors (like biting insects) or by animals."

With or without a definition, explaining a term through context can also help your reader grasp its meaning. Another way to help explain a term is to include a picture or illustration.

Overuse of technical terms, especially without explanations, is jargon. Readers complain about jargon more than any other writing fault, because writers often fail to realize that terms they know well may be difficult or meaningless to their audience. Try to substitute everyday language for jargon as often as possible.

**For example**: There may not be another correct way to refer to a "brinulator valve control ring." But that doesn't prevent you from saying "tighten the brinulator valve control ring securely" instead of "apply sufficient torque to the brinulator valve control ring to ensure that the control ring assembly is securely attached to the terminal such that loosening cannot occur under normal conditions." The first is a necessary use of a technical term. The second is jargon.

Special terms can be useful shorthand within a particular audience and may be the clearest way to communicate with that group. However, going beyond necessary technical terms can alienate your readers, even if they are specialists. If you must use many technical terms, you might also include a glossary or table that provides definitions.

## 24. Did you include visuals (such as tables, charts, or pictures) to explain text-heavy details that a visual could more easily convey?

Visuals—such as pictures, drawings, charts, graphs, and diagrams—can be effective tools for communicating health information. Visuals can make the presentation of complex information easier to comprehend and more attractive. They can also reinforce written or spoken health messages.

Visual communication can benefit all audiences, especially people with lower literacy and numeracy skills. Remember, though, that visuals can't speak for themselves. People can interpret visuals in different ways. Make sure to include an explanation of visuals.

Use these resources to help you make decisions about when and how to include visuals:

- Picture This! (National Institutes of Health, 2021)
  Suggestions for selecting or developing images (drawings, illustrations, charts, maps, or animations) to accompany your text.

- Visualizing Health (University of Michigan, 2014)
  Style guide for communicating health data with 54 examples of tested data visualizations distributed via a Creative Commons license.

- Making Data Talk (National Cancer Institute, 2011)
  Workbook to help select and communicate quantitative data in ways lay audiences can understand.

- Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills (Doak, Doak, and Root, 1996)
  Chapter 7, Visuals and How to Use Them, identifies the special needs of poor readers and provides guidance to make visuals responsive to those needs.

# References (for the CWA and User Guide)

The questions in the CWA and tips in the User Guide are based on longstanding writing practices presented in the following references:

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
- Brevity in Speech and Writing
- Campaign to Cut the Clutter
- CDC Health Literacy Website
- CDC Style Guide
- Center for Plain Language
- Chicago Style Manual
- Clear Communication Index
- Emotions from Reading and Learning
- Emotions and Types of Emotional Responses
- Examples of Methods of Organization
- Federal Plain Language Guidelines
- How to Use Italics
- NCEH/ATSDR Clear Writing Hub
- NCEH/ATSR Clear Writing Guide
- NCEH/ATSDR Communication Playbook
- Two Techniques That Help You Embrace Brevity

**Background**
The CWA and User Guide were developed by staff members in the Office of Communication (OC) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (NCEH/ATSDR) in 2019. OC tested and revised the CWA and User Guide in late 2024.

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