A Plain Language Audit Tool

Northwest Territories

N.W.T. LITERACY COUNCIL

A Plain Language Audit Tool

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

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

A) What is a plain language audit?

B) Who should do a plain language audit?

C) Why should you do a plain language audit?

D) How do you do a plain language audit?

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

E) Things to think about before you edit your documents in plain language.

F) Be a plain language advocate.

The project also produced a handbook **Write for Your Reader**. This handbook gives you the tools to write or edit your documents in plain language.

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

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The NWT Literacy Council offers plain language services. We can:

- Design and deliver plain language workshops to meet your needs.
- Edit your documents with plain language.
- Assess documents for plain language.
- Provide literacy profiles to help you understand your readers' needs.

A) *What is a plain language audit?*

A plain language audit tells you if your document(s) use plain language.

Plain language is writing for your readers.

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

This plain language audit uses:

- a checklist of plain language guidelines to tell you which guidelines are present and which are absent in your document(s).

- a readability test to tell you the grade reading level a person should have to read, understand, and use the information in your document(s).

B) *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.

You don't need any special skills, but you do need some time. 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.

C) *Why should you 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 you identify documents that should be edited for plain language.

Government, business, and nonprofit organizations use many documents:

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

Government, business, and nonprofit organizations 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.

D) *How do you do a plain language audit?*

There are four simple steps to this plain language audit:

Step 1)   Pick one document or group of documents to audit.

Step 2)   Use the checklist to find out which plain language guidelines are present and which are absent in your document(s).

Step 3)   Do one of the two readability tests described in this section.

Step 4)   Identify the document(s) that need a plain language edit.

Step 1: *Pick one document or a group of documents to audit.*

You do a plain language audit on documents that already exist. We suggest you read or scan your document(s) before you do the checklist in Step 2.

You can do a plain language audit on one document or on many documents at the same time.

You might 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 will be helpful to audit the group together.

Step 2: Check which plain language guidelines are present and which are absent in your document.

Copy this checklist and use it to assess your document. Use one form for each document if you are doing a group of documents.

i) Fill in the top of the form.

ii) Read each guideline and scan your document. Check Yes, No, or Does Not Apply to show how each plain language guideline applies to your document.

The document's topic is...				
The document's audience is...				
Document's name:	Document's type (brochure, form, etc.):			
Plain language guideline	Yes	No	Does not apply	Notes
1. The purpose of the document is clear. Readers know right away why they should read the document.				
2. Readers are told how the document is organized. For example, in the text at the beginning or a Table of Contents.				
3. Ideas are presented in a logical order: chronological, steps, specific to general, or some other method.				
4. The document is divided into short sections. Headings and subheadings show the sections and reflect the order.				
5. The most important information is at the beginning of the document and the beginning of each section.				
6. Only the essential information is included. Extra information is left out.				
7. The document respects gender, cultural, and other differences.				
8. The words are short, simple, and clear. Common words with no jargon.				

Plain language guideline	Yes	No	Does not apply	Notes
9. Technical terms are defined or left out.				
10. Acronyms are identified. For example, EI = Employment Insurance.				
11. Sentences are short – 20 words or less. Each sentence has just one idea.				
12. The tone is positive. Write "Policies are valid…" not "No policy is valid unless…"				
13. The writing style is active not passive. Write "The group decided…" not "A decision was made by the group to…"				
14. Paragraphs are short. The idea in one paragraph connects to the idea in the next.				
15. Instructions are presented in the order they should be done.				
16. Point form or lists are used if appropriate.				
17. There is white space between paragraphs and sections.				
18. Margins are at least one inch. The left margin is justified, the right is ragged.				
19. Text is a size 12 font or larger – at least the size of this text.				
20. Text is a serif font, like this, with hooks on each letter. This is a non-serif font.				
21. Headings and subheadings are different than the text and stand out.				
22. Text is in columns if the page is 8 1/2" wide or more.				
23. There is good contrast between the colour of the text and the paper.				
24. Boxes or other design features help people find important information.				
25. Photos, graphs, or other design features break up the text and make information clearer.				

Step 3: Do a readability test.

A readability test tells you 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. In the Northwest Territories, most public documents probably fall into the first category.

If your 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
Information for the general public that has new terms and concepts or specialized subject matter.	Grade 7 to 9
Specialized information for people who are familiar with the topic and who have good literacy skills.	Grade 10 +

Two readability tests are described here.

The first is the called the **Reading Effectiveness Tool.** To complete this test you need a computer and the internet.

The second is called the **Fry Readability Test**. To complete this test you need to follow the steps and use the graph found on pages 10 and 11.

1) The **Reading Effectiveness Tool** *is on the internet at:*
   www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/

> **Before you go online:**
>
> - **Know the grade reading level you are aiming for.**
> - **Know the following things about your document:**
>
>   For documents 30 sentences long or more:
>   - Find 3 samples, each with 10 sentences. This is a total of 30 sentences.
>   - Count the number of words with 3 syllables or more in the 30 sentences.
>
>   For documents shorter than 30 sentences:
>   - Count all the words with 3 syllables or more.
>   - Count the number of sentences.
>
>   Now go online and follow the easy steps to complete the Reading Effectiveness Tool.

2) The **Fry Readability Test** has four steps. Use the Fry Readability Graph on the opposite page for the fourth step.

   i) Count a 100-word sample. Use up to 5 random samples for longer documents. Use text without headings and subheadings. Try to avoid sections in point form.

   ii) Count the number of sentences in each sample. Estimate the length of the last sentence to the nearest 1/10th. (For example, 4.3)

   If you have more than one sample, find the average number of sentences per sample. First, add the number of sentences from each sample to get the total number of sentences. (For example, 8.4 + 7.9 + 11.1 + 6.2 = 33.6) Then divide the total number of sentences by the number of samples (For example, 33.6 ÷ 4 samples = 8.4 sentences)

   iii) Count the total number of syllables in each 100-word sample.

   If you have more than one sample, find the average number of syllables per sample. First, add together the number of syllables in each sample to get the total syllables (For example, 160 + 181 + 172 + 127 = 640) Then divide the total number of syllables by the number of samples. (For example, 640 ÷ 4 samples = 160 syllables).

   iv) Find the average sentence length and the average number of syllables on the Fry Readability Graph below. They intersect at the estimated grade level.

Here is a 100-word sample. The marks above the words count the syllables.

Literacy is how people understand and use information. It is how they read, write, and use numbers and communication technology such as computers, phone, fax, e-mail, and the internet.

Functional literacy is the skills people use to read, write, and use numbers for everyday things. People with functional literacy skills can understand and reply to letters. They can complete a form and apply for a job. They can read a drug prescription or a newspaper. They can follow written instructions.

Low literacy is when people do not have the literacy skills they need to do these daily tasks. They have trouble reading, writing, and using numbers.

100 words

Fry Readability Graph

To use the graph, find the average sentence length and the average number of syllables on the axes of the graph. They intersect at the estimated grade level.

For the 100-word sample on page 10:
- The number of sentences is 8.4.
- The number of syllables is 160.

The grade level for the sample is grade 9 to 10.

Syllables

Sentences

APPROXIMATE GRADE LEVEL
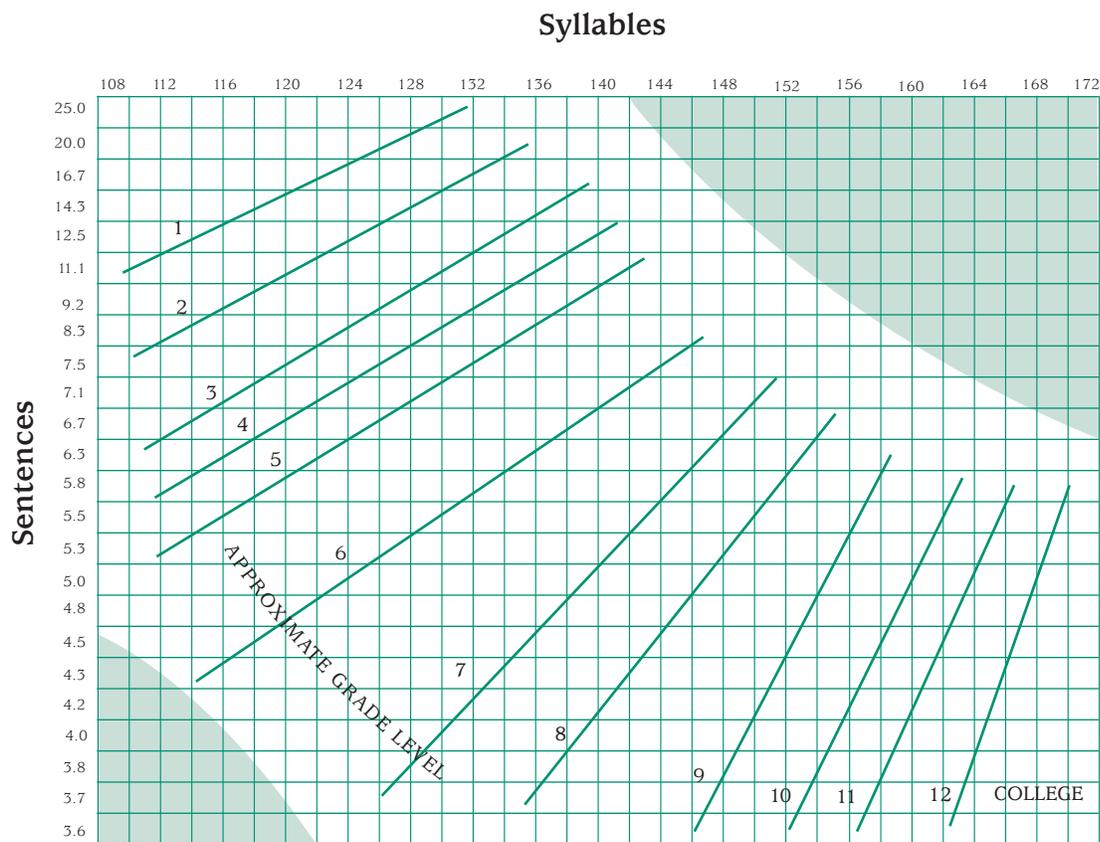
Step 4: *Identify the documents that need a plain language edit.*

You should do a plain language edit if your document has:

- More than a few 'No' responses to the plain language guidelines.

- A higher grade level than the one recommended for your audience.

After you do the audit, use the knowledge you have gained to edit your documents for plain language. Be a plain language advocate!

E) Things to think about before you edit your documents in plain language.

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

- How many documents do you need to communicate your 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?

ii) If you have a group of documents, make sure that terms are used consistently. Words should mean the same thing in each document.

iii) Identify a person and a schedule to do the edit.

iv) Learn about plain language writing. Use the handbook **Write for Your Reader** to help you.
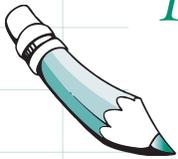
F) Be a plain language advocate.

i) Apply plain language guidelines when you write new documents.

ii) Organize plain language training for people who write public documents.

iii) Encourage your agency or government department to develop a plan to apply plain language guidelines to your public documents.