# Criteria for clear documents: a survey

Martin Evans   *April 2011*

A number of organisations have published criteria for evaluating the clarity of documents. We have collected these and mapped them to show their differing approaches and coverage.

They vary in coverage. Some try only to cover the use of appropriate plain words; others try to cover more or all the factors that make for an effective clear document. Some are detailed and specific; others broad and general. Which work best will depend on your purpose and the skill with which they are interpreted.
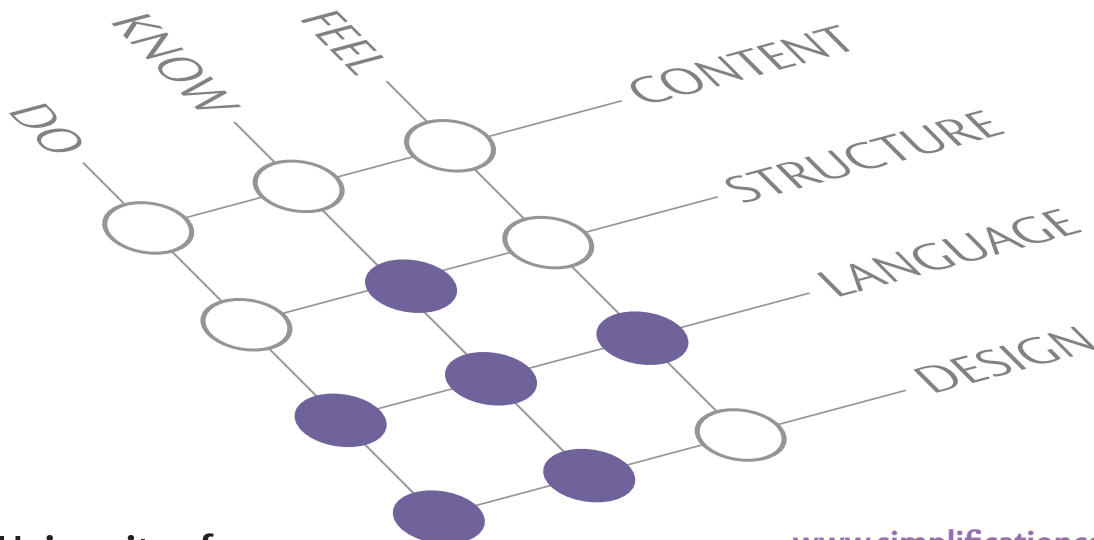
Criteria for clear documents

Our survey

This paper looks at how a range of organisations assess documents for clarity. As part of the process of reviewing our own clarity criteria, the Simplification Centre has looked for other examples. Not all the organisations that assess documents publish details of how they do it: some are commercial services and exercise a degree of confidentiality about their processes. Individual assessment reports are normally confidential to the document owners. So this survey is based on the partial information that is readily available.

The organisations and how they use their criteria

The set of criteria we reviewed come from a selction of clarity organisations across the English-speaking world which publish guidelines or criteria. They are:

- Center for Plain Language
- Communications Research Institute
- Plain English Campaign
- Plain English Foundation
- Plain Language Association International
- Plain Language Commission
- Simplification Centre
- Verbumetrics
- Word Centre
- WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust

The criteria we reviewed fall into four general categories:

Badges: these certify that the document achieves a good standard and earns a badge to show for it. Examples include DALBAR[1] awards and Plain English Crystal Marks. The awards have to be paid for and the fees in some cases are substantial.

Awards: these are competitive and the winner(s) represent the best practice of those competing. Examples include the Centre for Plain Language's ClearMark awards.

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1 DALBAR (www.dalbar.com) – a US consultancy – offer a communication benchmarking service and a quality kitemark, the Communications Seal. However they no longer publish any details of their criteria and so we have not been able to include them in this survey.

Benchmarks: the document is compared with some measure of current best practice, which the organisation then sets out to emulate. The Simplification Centre's scheme is of this kind.

Guidelines: criteria you can apply yourself, to improve your documents. Example: the Plain Language Association International's guidelines for evaluating your own document.

Putting criteria into categories

In the rest of this paper we reprint each set of criteria, in a common format. In order to compare them we also map them against a simple taxonomy, which we are using to evolve our own Simplification Centre criteria. This takes the form of a 4 by 3 matrix.

The horizontal dimension shows the four types of input which the producer applies in creating the document:

Content: the selection of information to be communicated

Structure: how the information is organised, sequenced and linked

Language: how the information is expressed in words

Design; the typography, layout and graphic design of the document

The vertical dimension shows three aspects of the reader's response to the document, which together determine its effectiveness:

Feeling: the reader's attitude and their emotional response

Understanding: what they know from reading it

**Action:** what they are able to do as a result

Some caveats

The criteria we quote are what the organisation concerned publishes. They may not do justice to the detail and rigour of the organisation's processes.

Allocating criteria to the taxonomy is a matter of judgement. Without seeing examples of how the the organisation has applied a criterion, we may have got it wrong.

In some cases we have allocated a criterion to more than one category. So the number of criteria in each category says nothing about the relative weight given to that category. We show criteria that fall in only one category like this: **2**

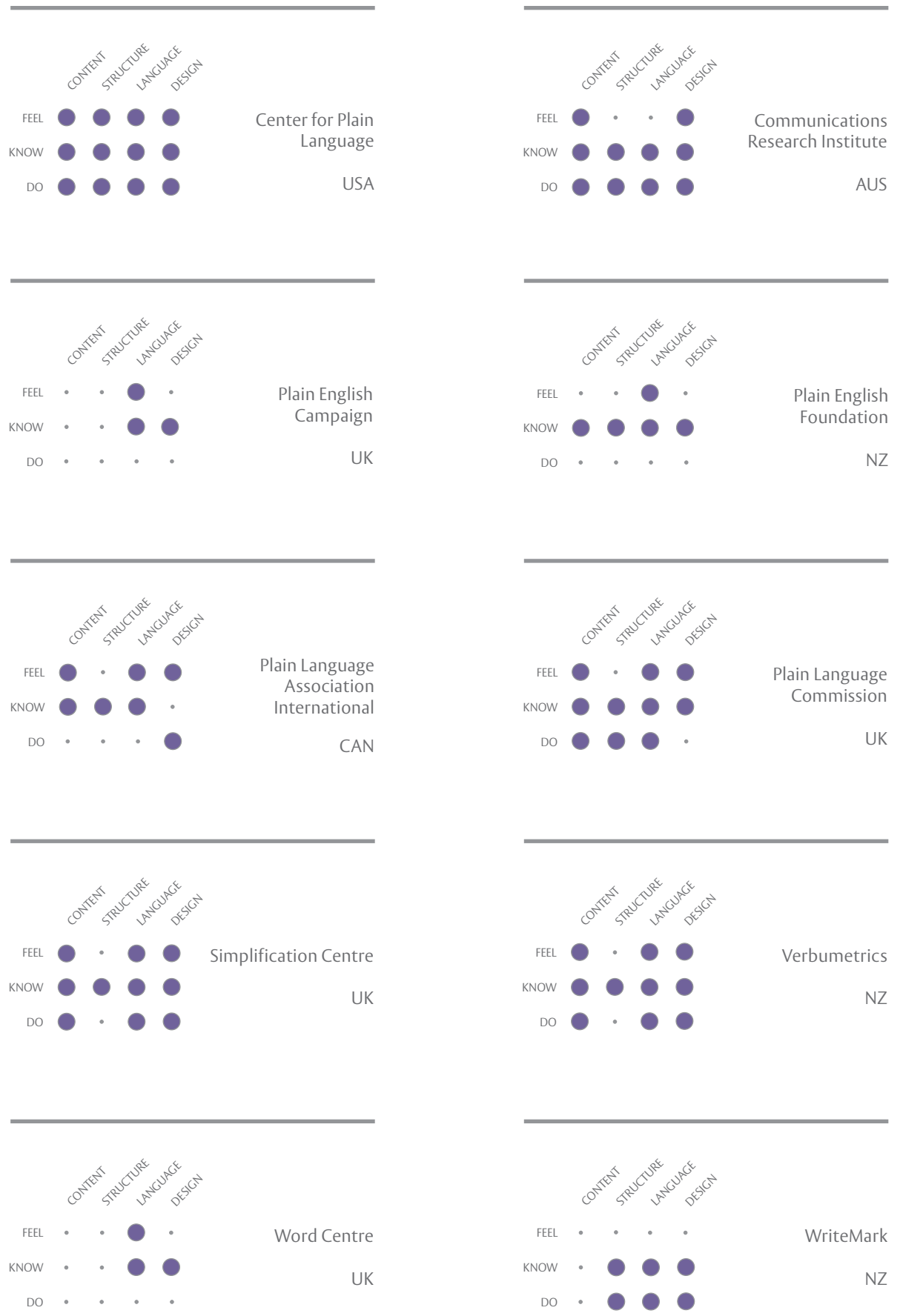Criteria that fall in more than one category we show like this: **2**
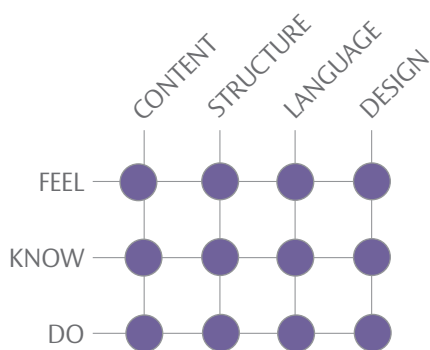
Some of our attributions may seem surprising. We have put most criteria referring to grammar, spelling and punctuation into Language/Feel rather than Language/Know. Mistakes in grammar, spelling or punctuation rarely cause misunderstandings in practice. Although they do not affect the reader's understanding of what is being said, they can powerfully influence the reader's attitude to the author, often undermining the organisation's credibility.

Similarly, criteria that urge the use of the active rather than passive voice we have normally put into Language/Feel. Again it is rare that the use of the passive itself makes things hard to understand. Where it does, it could be remedied without changing to the active. A passive often prompts the question 'by whom?' – but this can equally be remedied by saying so – 'by John.' More actives mean better style and an easier read: but that is a matter of feeling and attitude, not understanding.

The sets of criteria vary from very detailed checklists to much broader general guidelines. Either approach may be valid and we draw no conclusions about the relative merits of the differing organisations' approach. We value the diversity.

The tables on pages 5 and 6 illustrate how far each organisation's criteria cover the matrix. Pages 7 to 16 then set out each organisation's criteria in full and map them on to the matrix.

Mapping the criteria

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Center for Plain Language

USA

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Communications Research Institute

AUS

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Plain English Campaign

UK

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Plain English Foundation

NZ

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Plain Language Association International

CAN

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Plain Language Commission

UK

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Simplification Centre

UK

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Verbumetrics

NZ

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN

Word Centre

UK

FEEL KNOW DO

CONTENT STRUCTURE LANGUAGE DESIGN
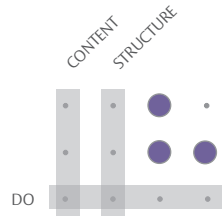
WriteMark

NZ

FEEL KNOW DO

Coverage

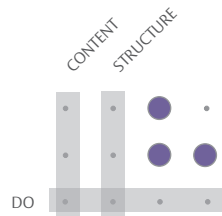The sets of criteria vary in their coverage. Some are narrowly focused. Others are wide-ranging.

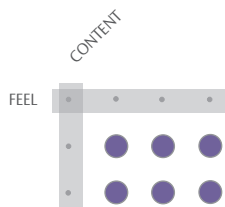Four of the ten omit one or more dimension of the matrix.

Omit 3 dimensions
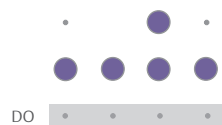
Plain English Campaign **UK**

Word Centre **UK**

Omits 2 dimensions

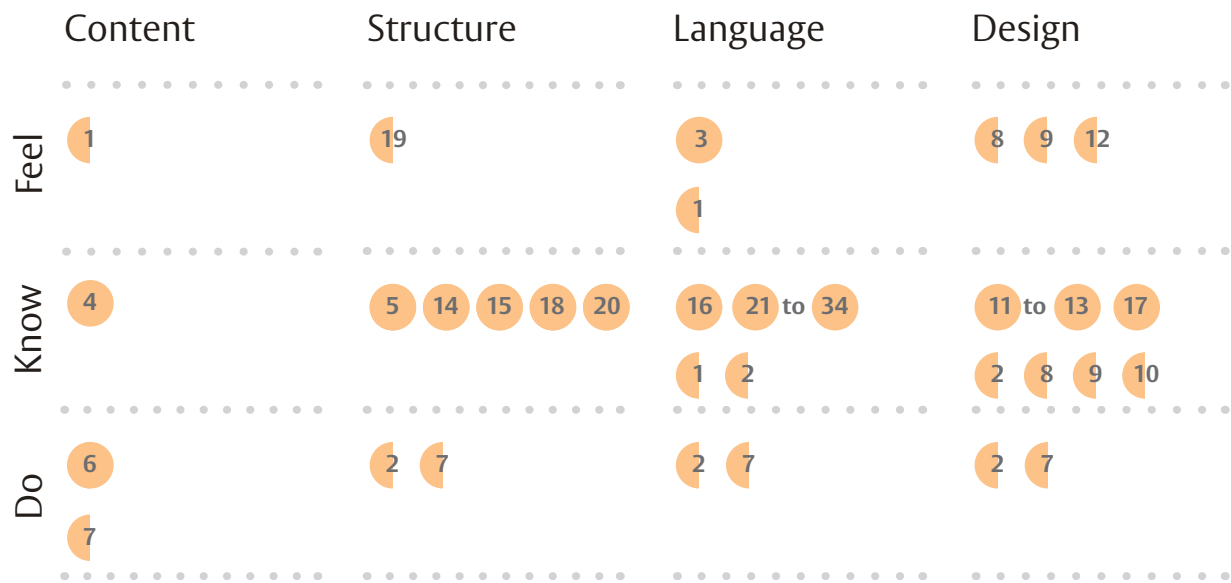WriteMark **NZ**

Omits 1 dimension

Plain English Foundation **AUS**

Center for Plain Language USA

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel	1	19	3 / 1	8 9 12
Know	4	5 14 15 18 20	16 21 to 34 / 1 2	11 to 13 17 / 2 8 9 10
Do	6 / 7	2 7	2 7	2 7

Criteria *Used as the judging criteria for the first ClearMark awards in 2010*

In general

1 Identifies the audience and is clearly written for those readers.

2 Makes information easy to find, understand and use.

3 Where possible, adopts a relaxed, conversational style, rather than a stuffy bureaucratic style. Is simple and direct without being too formal.

4 Omits unnecessary information.

5 Puts the most important information first.

6 Tells readers where to go for more information.

7 Ideally, has been tested on typical readers. The more readers there will be, the more important testing is.

Design

8 Identifies the audience and is written clearly for those readers.

9 Avoids dense, cluttered text.

10 Uses white space effectively in the margins and between sections.

11 Uses a readable type size and typeface.

12 Uses vertical lists, with hanging indents, to make a group or series of items easy to identify.

13 Uses diagrams, tables, charts, and pictures as needed to help explain the text.

Organisation

14 When appropriate, provides a short summary at the beginning, containing the central message or answering the main question.

15 Orders the information in a sequence that's logical for the readers.
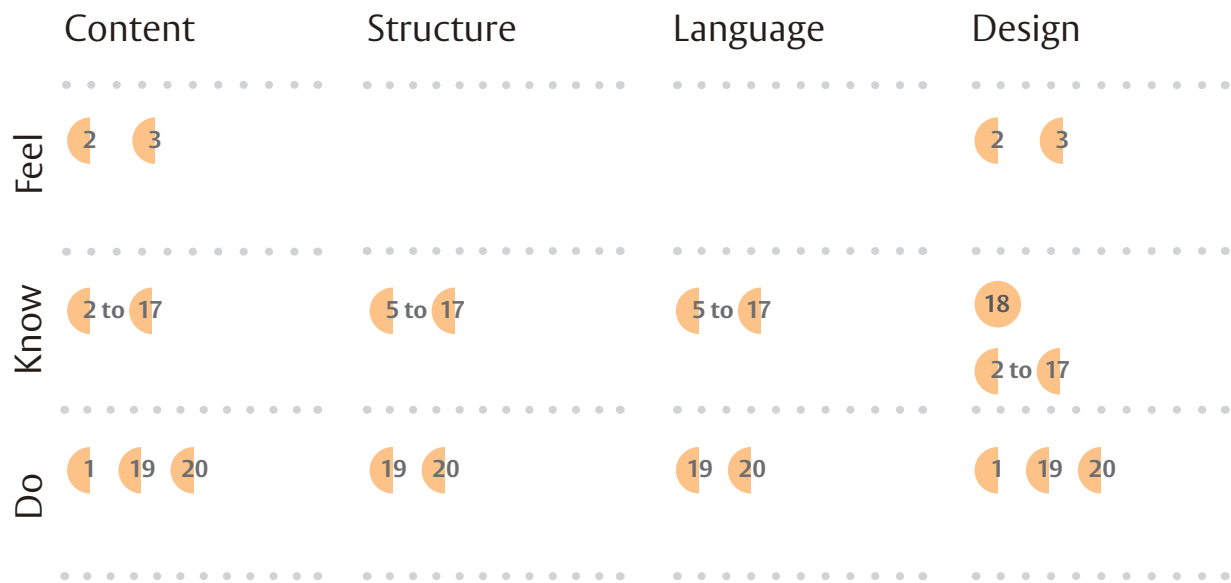
16 Uses short sections or paragraphs.

17 Uses informative headings to guide readers and help them scan for the information most important to them.

18 Minimises cross-references.

19 In explanatory documents, creates a smooth flow with effective transitions and topic sentences.

20 Minimises number of levels.

Sentences

21 Uses mainly short and medium-length sentences. Has an average sentence length of no more than 20 words.

22 Keeps the subject and verb close together in each sentence.

23 Uses the active voice unless there's a good reason for the passive.

24 Avoids unnecessary multiple negatives.

25 Regularly puts a series of conditions or qualifiers after, not before, the main clause.

26 Avoids ambiguity by placing modifying words next to what they modify.

Words

27 Prefers common words, usually the shorter ones.

28 Omits unnecessary words.

29 Avoids abstract nouns that should be replaced with strong verbs.

30 Generally avoids words unfamiliar to the audience. If a word unfamiliar to the audience is necessary, defines it clearly.

31 Uses pronouns wherever possible.

32 Minimises abbreviations.

33 Gives common words their common meanings, and doesn't define them. Never defines a word to mean. something other than its commonly accepted meaning.

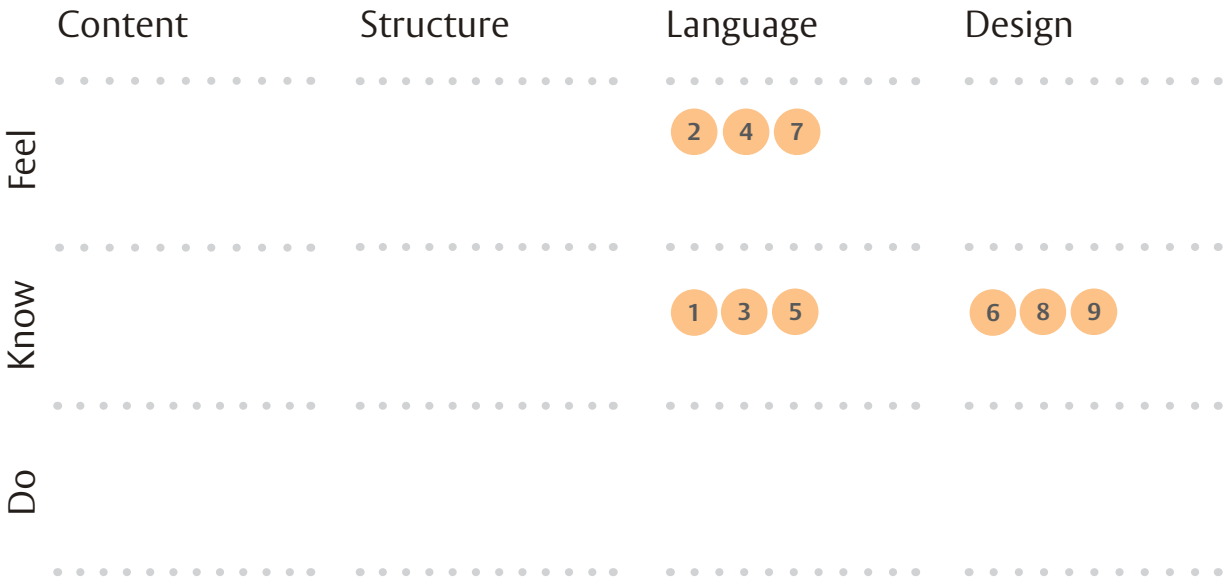34 Consistently uses the same term for the same thing or idea.

Communications Research Institute Australia

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel	2 3			2 3
Know	2 to 17	5 to 17	5 to 17	18 2 to 17
Do	1 19 20	19 20	19 20	1 19 20

Criteria

These were the criteria used in a benchmarking exercise on credit card statements

1 Identify what the document is (credit card statement).

2 Find and identify who is providing the statement (company name).

3 Identify who the credit card statement is for (name, address, account number).

4 Find and explain the statement period (ie monthly statement).

5 Find and explain the date range covered by the statement.

6 Find and explain the opening balance.

7 Find and explain the closing balance.

8 Identify the total of any cash advances for the statement period and the interest rate that applies.

9 Identify the total of any purchases for the statement period and the interest rate that applies.

10 Find and explain any interest that has been charged to the account.

11 Identify any transaction dates.

12 Find and explain any transaction descriptions.

13 Find and explain the overall credit limit.

14 Find and explain any available credit.

15 Find and explain any payments that have been made.

16 Find and explain any payments due (when, how much, any overdue amounts).

17 Find and explain any terms and conditions.

18 Find and explain how many pages are included in the statement.

19 Find and explain how to make a payment.

20 Find and explain how to find more information.

Plain English Campaign UK

|	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel			2 4 7	
Know			1 3 5	6 8 9
Do				

Criteria

The campaign assesses documents for its Crystal Mark award. It states that as each document deals with a different subject for different readers, it is impossible to set a precise standard. Things it looks for include:

1   The use of 'everyday' English.

2   Consistent and correct use of punctuation and grammar.

3   An average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

4   Plenty of 'active' rather than 'passive' verbs.

5   Explanations of technical terms.

6   Good use of lists.

7   Words like 'we' and 'you' instead of 'the Society' or 'the applicant'.

8   Clear, helpful headings, which stand out from the text.

9   A good typesize and a clear typeface.

Plain English Foundation Australia

See also Verbumetrics

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel			5 7 10	
Know		2 3	1 6 9	4
			8	
Do				
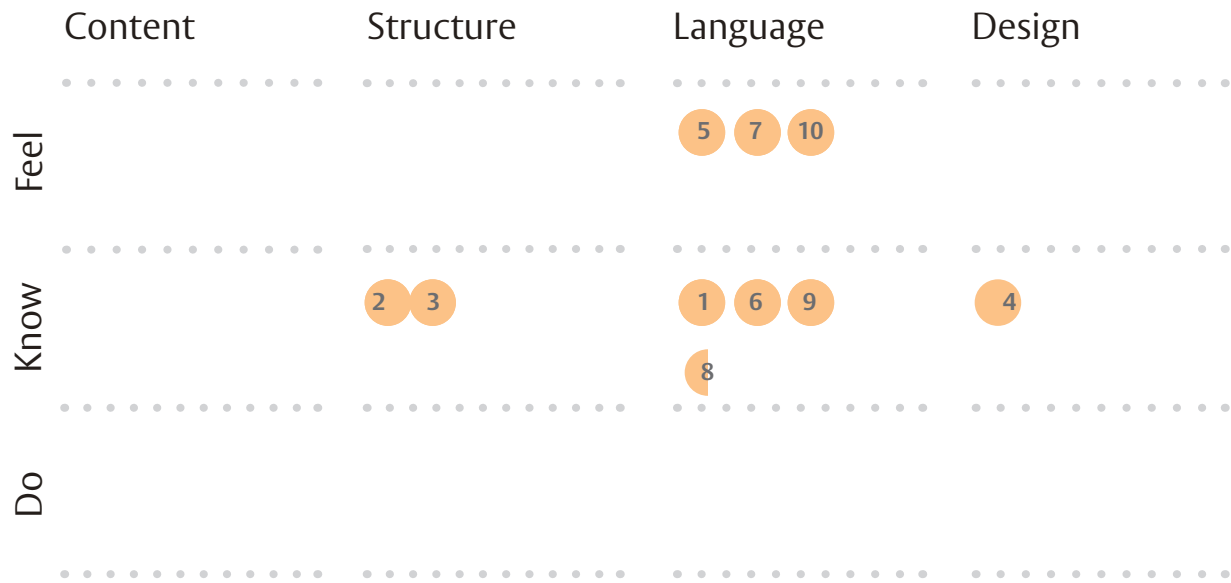
Criteria

1   Always consider your readers and adapt your writing to their needs rather than your personal preferences.

2   Clearly identify your main message and don't bury it in the detail.

3   Structure your documents to put the most important information first, followed by the details.

4   Pay attention to design and layout as much as to language.

5   Choose a formal but friendly tone that is neither too hip nor too heavy.

6   Use short, familiar words where they match your meaning, and don't dress up the text with long words just to sound impressive.

7   Prefer the active voice ('I think you can finish') rather than the passive voice ('it is suggested consideration be given to the finishing of').

8   Be ruthless on clutter, minimising words and details that add little value.

9   Write with an average sentence length between 15-20 words, but vary individual sentences between 10 and 35 words.

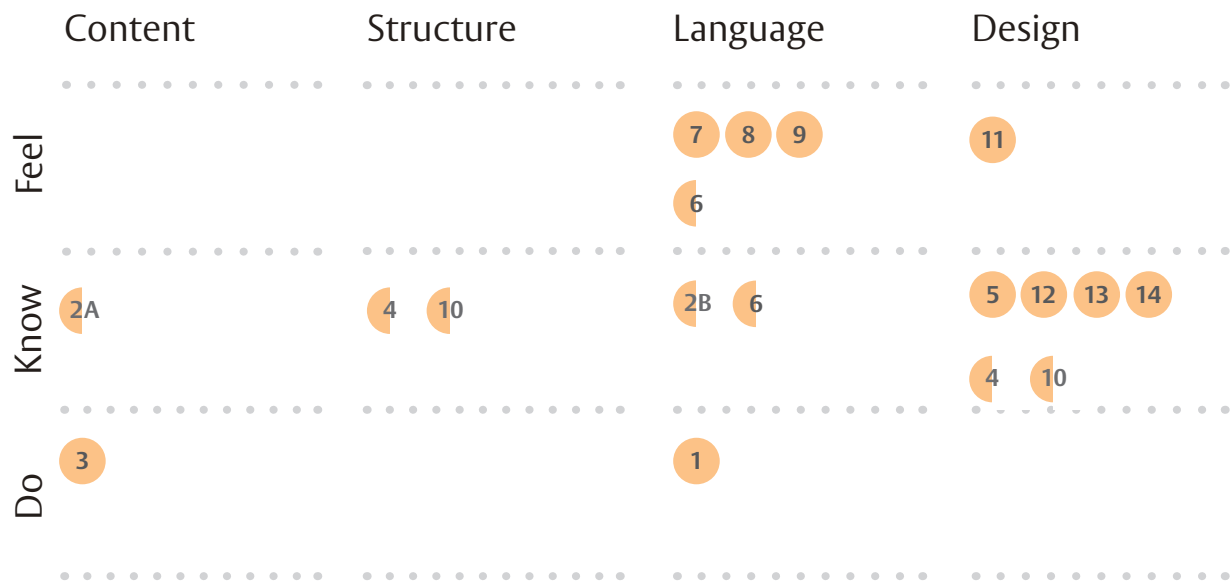10 Always check your text carefully for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel	3 4 8 9		9	2 / 3 4
Know	10	6	7 / 5 6 8	5
Do	1	1	1	1
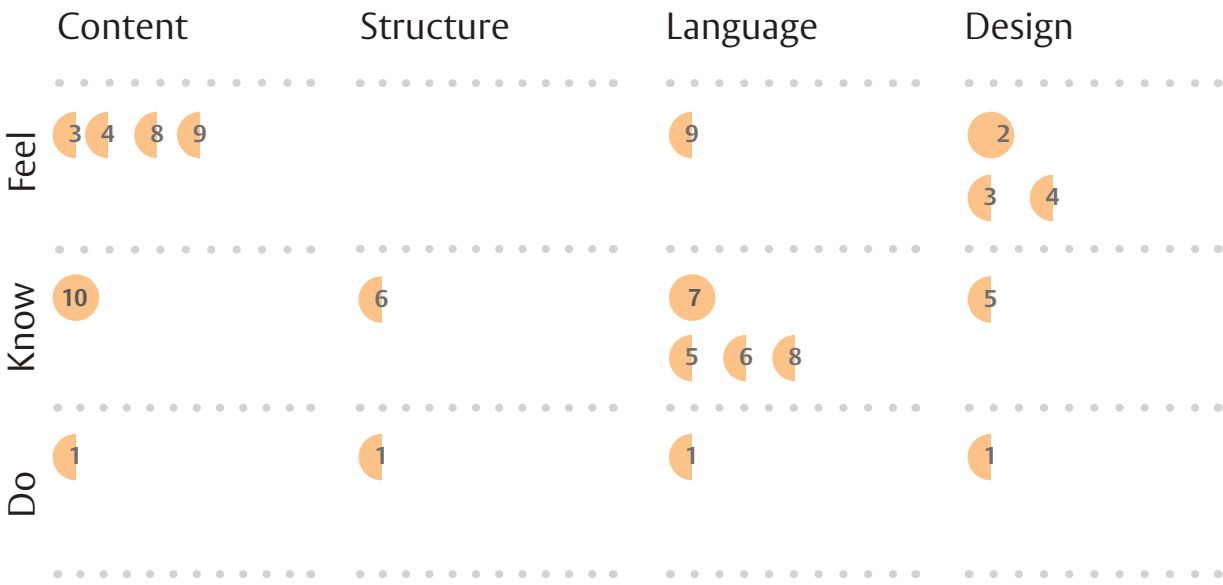
Criteria

Advice on evaluating your own document
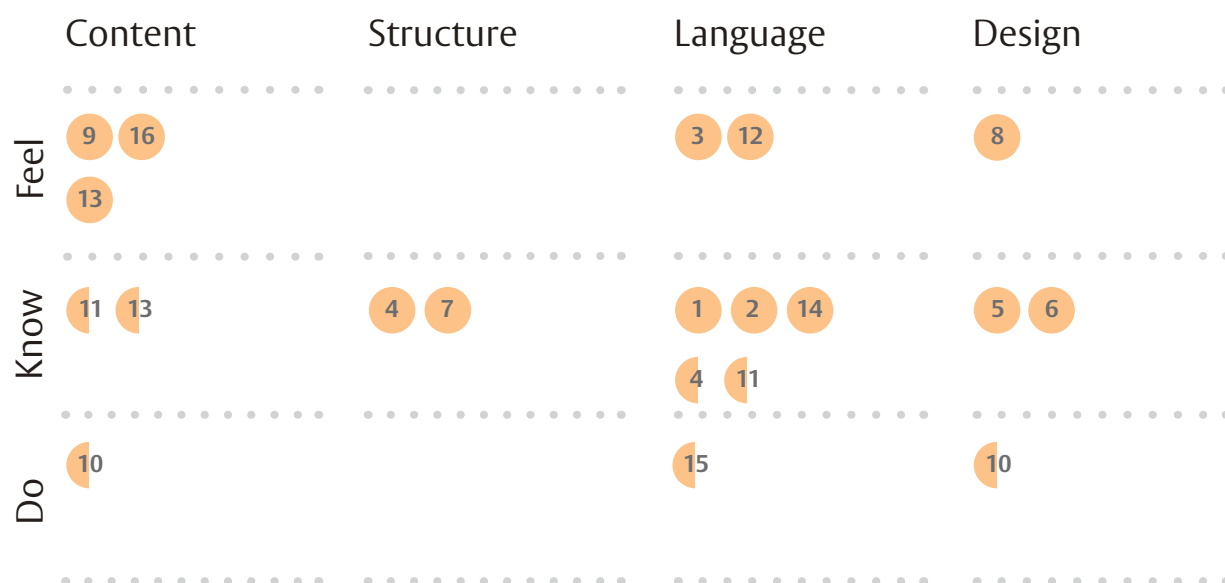
1 Will members of the intended audience use this document?

2 Does it appear interesting?

3 Does it appear relevant to the reader?

4 Will the audience member take the time to read this document?

5 Is the information accessible?

6 Is it well-organised and comprehensible?

7 Can the reader understand the language and concepts?

8 Is it clear? Is it concrete?

9 Is it personal?

10 Does it answer readers' questions?

Plain Language Commission UK

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel			7 8 9 6	11
Know	2A	4 10	2B 6	5 12 13 14 4 10
Do	3		1	

Criteria

Used for accreditation with the Clear English Standard

1. Is the purpose obvious or stated early and clearly?

2. A: Is the information accurate, relevant and complete, anticipating readers' questions and answering them?
   B: Are essential technical terms explained or defined?

3. Is the contact point stated for readers who want to know more?

4. Is the information well organised and easy to navigate through, with appropriate headings and sub-headings?

5. Is there appropriate use of illustrations, diagrams and summary panels?

6. Is the style appropriate for the audience, with a good average sentence length (say 15-20 words), plenty of active-voice verbs, and reasonably short paragraphs?

7. Is the document free of pomposity, verbosity and officialese (no aforesaids, notwithstandings, herebys, adumbrates, commencements and inter alias)?

8. Is the text grammatically sound and well punctuated?

9. Is capitalisation consistent in text and headings?

10. If there is a contents page, are its headings consistent with those in the text?

11. Does the document look good?

12. Is the type easily readable and is there enough space between lines of type?

13. Is there a clear hierarchy of headings and spaces?

14. Have emphasis devices, such as bold type, been used well?

   Note
   In the Commission's original criteria, 2A and 2B appear as a single criterion. We have separated them so we can allow the two parts to fall in different categories

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Simplification Centre UK

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel	9 16 13		3 12	8
Know	11 13	4 7	1 2 14 / 4 11	5 6
Do	10		15	10

Criteria

Language

1 Directness: use of direct language to make clear who's doing what.

2 Plain words: extent to which the vocabulary is easily understood.

3 Grammar and punctuation: conformity with the practice of good standard English.

4 Readability: ease with which the reader can follow the argument of the text.

Design

5 Legibility: use of legible fonts and text layout.

6 Graphic elements: use of tables, bullet lists, graphs, charts, dicgrams, illustrations etc.

7 Structure: quality of the document's organisation in relation to its function.

8 Impression: attractiveness and approachability of the overall appearance.

Relationship

9 Who from: is it clear who is communicating.

10 Contact: whether there are clear contact points and means of contact.

11 Audience fit: appropriateness to the knowledge and skills of the users.

12 Tone: matching the style and language to the context.

Content

13 Relevance: how relevant the content is to the user.

14 Subject: whether it is clear what the communication is about.

15 Action: clarity about what action is required of the user.

16 Alignment: compliance with intended aims and values.

Verbumetrics Australia

See also Plain English Foundation

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel	5 / 1		8 10 / 1 2	7
Know	3 / 1	6 / 4	9 11	4 7
Do	12	12	12	7 12
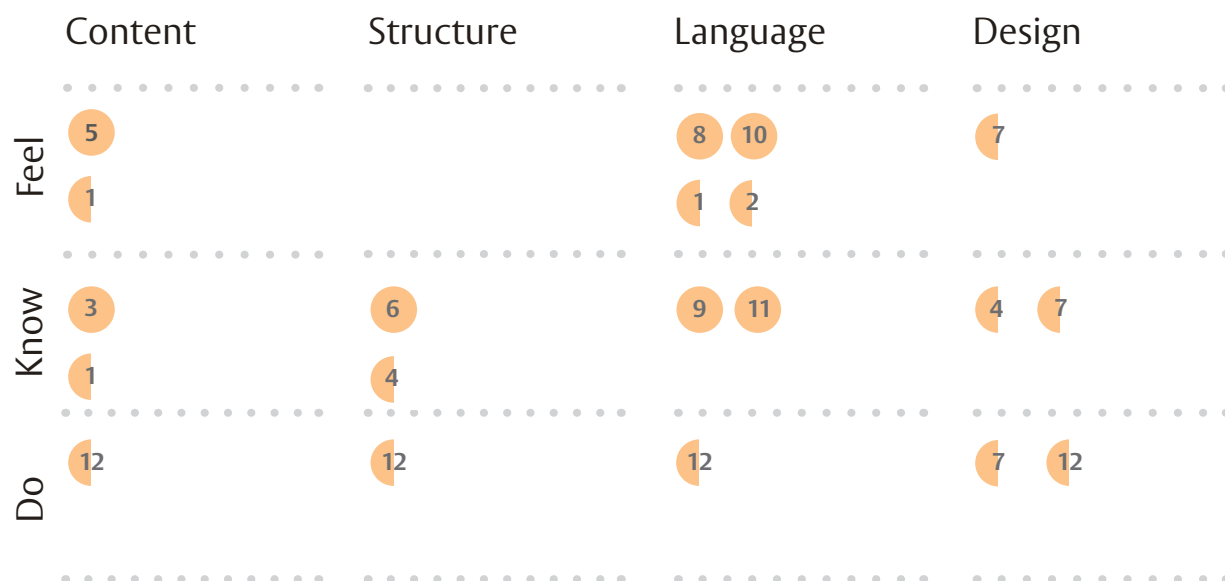
Criteria

Audience and purpose

1 Audience needs
Measure: reader profile
Scope: mapping of benchmarks suitable for the audience of the document.

2 Reader perceptions
Measure: perception surveys
Scope: audience views on existing writing.

Content and structure

3 Focus
Measure: % key material
Scope: ratio of key content: detail.

4 Structure
Measure: structure mapping
Scope: evaluation of structural design, complexity, balance, headings, numbering and navigation.

5 Persuasiveness
Measure: value analysis
Scope: ratio of description: analysis.

6 Logic
Measure: proof analysis
*Scope:* evaluation of key arguments in an analytical document.

Design

7 Document design
Measure: layout index
Scope: weighted index of elements such as type, spacing, justification, visual aids, headings, bullets and lists etc.

Language

8 Tone
Measure: tone scale
Scope: language level and appropriateness for a particular sudience.

9 Readability
Measure: Fry graph
Scope: Likely comprehension of text with intended audience.

10 Clarity
Measure: active voice
Scope: balance of different verb types and likely impact on audience.

11 Efficiency
Measure: key words
Scope: ratio of core meaning words to functional words.

Outcomes

12 Usability
Measure: testing
Scope: measurement of actual outcomes.

The Word Centre UK

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel			5 7 1	
Know			3 4 6 1	8 9 10 2
Do				
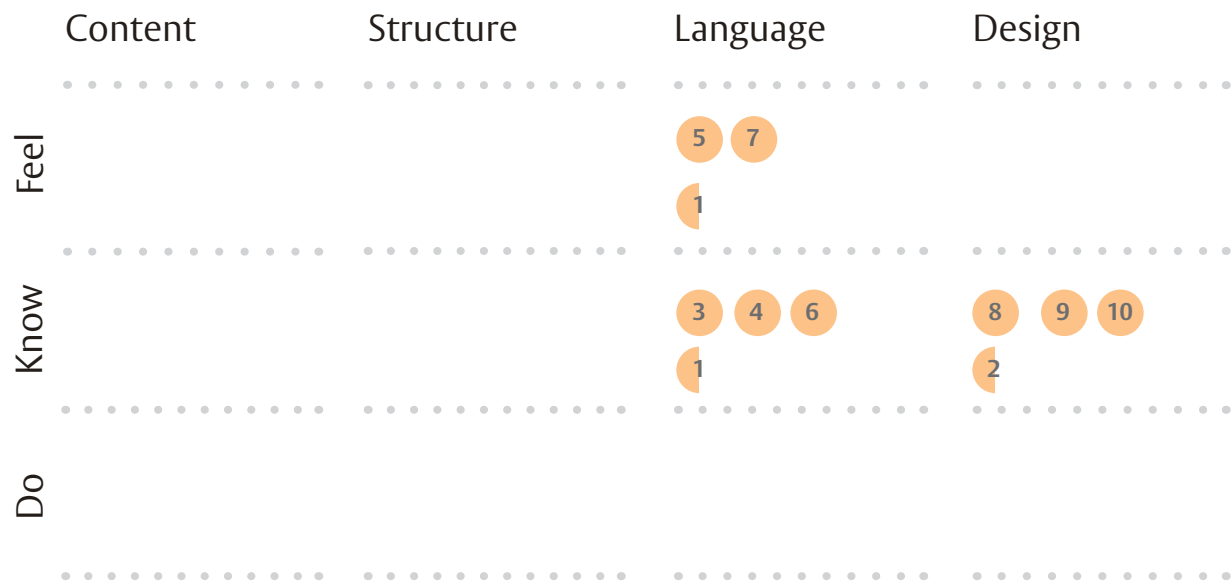
Criteria

Standards

1 Is the language appropriate for the intended readers, and as clear as it can be?

2 Is the design and layout of the document as clear as possible?

Guidelines

Put yourself in your reader's shoes and use:

3 everyday words wherever possible, and explain any technical terms you have to use.

4 a glossary to explain terms that are used often, or where the explanation would take up too much room in the main text.

5 'you' and 'we' instead of 'the applicant', 'the borrower', 'the bank', 'the company' and so on.

6 short sentences. Stick to one or two ideas in a sentence, and aim for an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words.

7 active verbs, rather than passive verbs. In other words, write 'We will pay this into your account when we get your letter telling us.....' rather than 'Payment will be made when your letter is received....'

8 plenty of 'signposts' to help your reader find what they are looking for. These include contents lists, headings and sub-headings, and lists of key features (like this one).

9 a line length of between 45 and 60 characters, depending on the type size

10 a type face that your readers can read easily, bearing in mind their age and likely reading ability.

WriteMark Plain English Awards Trust New Zealand

	Content	Structure	Language	Design
Feel				
Know		2	4 5	3 6
Do			1	1
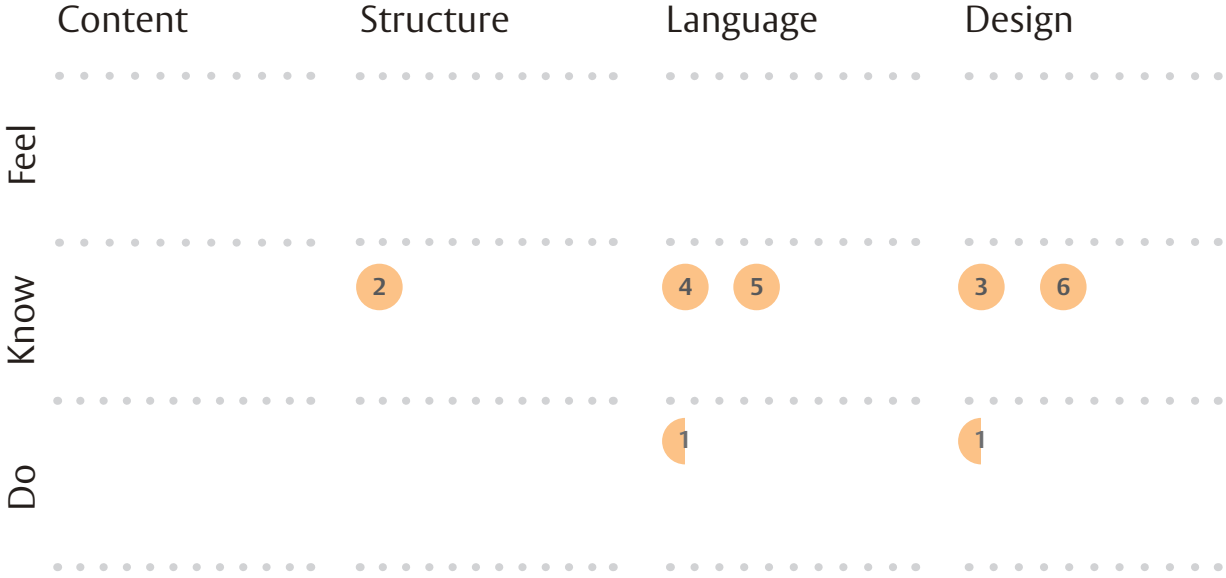
Criteria

These are the trust's plain English criteria for documents. There is a further set of criteria for websites.

1   The purpose of the document is clear at the start.

2   The structure is clear and logical to the reader.

3   The headings are informative and clearly signpost the main messages.

4   The words are precise and familiar. Technical terms are explained.

5   The sentences are mostly short and straightforward.

6   The layout helps the reader absorb the message quickly and accurately.

Conclusions

The ten sets of criteria we looked at varied in approach, in breadth of coverage, and in degree of details.

The general **approach** was to produce a set of guidelines or heuristics, which authors and assessors could use to guide their judgement. The two exceptions to this approach were the Communications Research Institute which offered a framework for user testing; and Verbumetrics which offered a set of quantifiable performance measures.

On **breadth**, there was a wider spread of approaches. The Plain English Campaign (and Word Centre) took the narrowest focus, concentrating entirely on what makes the language understandable, legible and appropriate in tone. Most of the others attempted to cover the full range of what makes a document effective and approachable. In between these approaches were the Plain English Foundation and Writemark: two different and distinctive perspectives on clarity.

In **degree of detail**, WriteMark was again distinctive, with just 6 criteria. Most of the others had between 9 and 13 criteria of a general kind. Communications Research Institute was an exception again, its 20 criteria being more in the form of usability test questions. The Center for Plain Language took by far the most detailed approach, with its 39 questions, methodically organised into issues.

And it was the CPL which was the only organisataion to achieve a **coverage** of all 16 points on our matrix. The Simplification Centre's own criteria missed two, and we were particularly interested to see how others had covered these.

Two organisations had criteria which specifically covered the way structure facilitiates the users' actions.

> Tells readers where to go for more information (CPL)

> Will members of the intended audience use this document? (PLA)

And a further two (Verbumetrics and CRI) covered this by usability measures.

We think that is important to distinguish what users can know from what they can do. This becomes particularly important in interactive media, where information architecture addresses the structuring of the information in the site or application, but the user also depends

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crucially on the design of the interaction with the device in order to be able to do what they want with it.

Only the Center for Plain Language specifically covered the effect of the structure of the information on the way users feel.

> Orders the information in a sequence that's logical for the readers.

Even here it could be argued that a logical sequence is as much a matter of making the information findable (what users will get to know) as about addressing the user's attitude (what they will feel). Sequence, though, is a key part of engaging the reader. People are engaged by stories, and if they are to feel sufficiently hooked to follow through a functional document which may be far from easy going, they need a narrative that they can relate to. The increasing interest in content strategy for the web has brought a renewed interest traditional approaches to narrative and rhetoric, where the structure and sequencing of the content is key[1].

The Simplification Centre will be evolving its own criteria in the light of this study, bearing in mind that it has looked only at what organisations publish about their criteria. We hope it will also encourage others to publish more.

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1 See for example: Heath, C and Heath D, (2007) *Made to Stick.* London, Random House; Jones C, (2010) *Clout: the art and science of influential web content.* Berkeley, CA, New Riders

Sources

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www.plainenglish.co.uk/crystal-mark/about-the-crystal-mark/the-crystal-mark-standard.html
Accessed on 13 January 2011
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www.plainenglishfoundation.com/ConsultingServices/Auditingandevaluation/tabid/3063/Default.aspx
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Neil James: *Plain English: the past, the present and the future.* Article in *Blue Pencil* (Newsletter of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc)
www.editorsnsw.com/pdfs/blue%20pencil/bp%202008/bp_nov_08.pdf
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Further reading

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  www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED221866.pdf
  Accessed on 13 January 2011

  There are many published guidelines for clear writing – and many more recent ones But this report is unusual in covering layout as well as language issues and setting out the research that supports each guideline.

- Plain Language Action and Information Network (2010) *Federal plain language guidelines.*

  www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/bigdoc/fullbigdoc.pdf
  Accessed on 13 January 2011

  An updated set of plain language guidelines associated with the Plain Writing Act 2010 which requires US federal agencies to have processes to deliver communications in plain language.

- Neil James (2007) *Setting the standard: some steps towards a plain language profession* PLAIN conference, Amsterdam, October 2007

  www.plainenglishfoundation.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gPEw7EBXTgA%3d&tabid=3067
  Accessed on 13 January 2011

  A review of some existing standards and a plea for the development of professional plain language standards. Neil James' writings were the starting point for this technical paper.

Other clear document criteria

There are other sources of plain language and clear document criteria, besides the organisations we reviewed in this paper. We focused in particular on criteria associated with standards, and for which details were published.

As well as the Plain English Campaign, the Plain Language Commission and the Word Centre, there are other consultancies which sell document kitemarking services:

- **Plain Words Society** offers Plain Words Certification. It gives no details of the criteria on its website.
  www.plainwords.co.uk/certification_programme.html

- **SCPR Ltd** offers a Gold Star Award, but again gives no details of the criteria it applies.
  www.scpr.co.uk/goldstar.php

- **DALBAR** – a US consultancy – offers a communication benchmarking service and a quality kitemark, the Communications Seal. However they no longer publish any details of their criteria.
  www.dalbar.com/ProductsampServices/ResearchCommunications/
  CommunicationsSealEvaluation/tabid/192/Default.aspx

All these sites accessed on 13 January 2011