

THE CLEAR WRITING CHECKLIST

27 checks to run before you hit send, for emails, reports, and proposals

Before you write

- [] Can you state the purpose of this document in one sentence? Write that sentence first.
- [] Do you know who will read it, and what they already know?
- [] What single action should the reader take after reading? Name it.
- [] Is a document the right medium, or would a quick call resolve it faster?

Structure

- [] The main point appears in the first two sentences, not the last paragraph.
- [] Each paragraph carries one idea; the first line of the paragraph states it.
- [] Headings could be read alone and still tell the story.
- [] Requests and deadlines are impossible to miss (bold, top, or bulleted).
- [] Background material sits after the ask, not before it.

Sentences

- [] Average sentence length is under 20 words; no sentence exceeds 35.
- [] Verbs do the work: 'we decided' not 'a decision was made'.
- [] One idea per sentence, split anything with two 'and's.
- [] Zombie nouns removed: 'utilize' → 'use', 'implementation of' → 'implementing'.
- [] No throat-clearing openers: 'It should be noted that...', 'As you may know...'.

Words

- [] Jargon is translated or cut unless every reader shares it.
- [] Acronyms are spelled out on first use.

- [] Hedges trimmed: 'quite', 'somewhat', 'fairly', 'very' rarely earn their place.
- [] Numbers are concrete: 'a 30% drop' beats 'a significant decrease'.
- [] Adjectives are backed by evidence or deleted.

Tone & audience

- [] Reads politely when skimmed, because it will be skimmed.
- [] Nothing here would embarrass you if forwarded.
- [] Written from the reader's interest ('you get...') not the writer's ('I want...').
- [] Bad news is stated plainly, early, with a next step attached.

Final pass

- [] Read it aloud once, anywhere you stumble, the reader will too.
- [] Cut 10% of the words. There is always 10%.
- [] Names, dates, figures, and links double-checked.
- [] Subject line/title says what the document is and what's needed: 'Q3 budget, approval needed by Fri'.

Want more? Weekly essays at spelden.substack.com. Questions: sonam@spelden.co