Readability Checklist

More than 27 million Americans over age 17 are functionally illiterate
(meaning they read somewhere below the 8th grade level).

About 40% of minority youth are functionally illiterate.

We often cannot know the reading proficiency of our immigrant clients.

Plain language is more easily translated into other languages.

Low literacy is not just about the "words" – it is also about usability
and visual accessibility.

Always keep your audience in mind. Sometimes it is difficult to write in plain language because it sounds "choppy". This is especially true for people with legal training. But if your writing is not plain, then low literacy people cannot read or understand what you are saying to them. **The information you give to your clients is of the utmost importance! Don't make it inaccessible to them**. It may also be wasting precious time for someone to have to follow up with you to get an explanation.

Over-all:

☐ Use headings and subheadings to organize the material. Poor readers have trouble extracting info of value. Clear subheadings give clues to the contents of a section. Questions work well, ie. How can I get my refund?

☐ Use active voice, not passive voice.

☐ Give only needed information. Too much info is difficult to track. Avoid stating the law name or statute unless absolutely necessary.

☐ Use bold, italics, and underlining for important info, but too much of it can be visually hard.

☐ Don't go font crazy!!   Don't use all caps.

☐ Plenty of white space makes it easier to look at. Leave space between paragraphs and sections.

☐ Use a minimum of 12 point font size, 14 for headings. For seniors or people with sight challenges use at least 14 for text, 16 for headings. Use fonts that are easy to read.

☐ Try to use 350-400 words per page if possible. But you need to balance this with the "overwhelming" feeling of too many pages.

☐ Check the grade level. It should average around the 5th to 7th grade. If the information is completely unfamiliar to your reader make it as simple as you can manage. Remember that the readability stats are a guideline. Sometimes terms that are unavoidable will push the reading level up. Just be sure you have defined all the complex terms.

Paragraphs and Sentences:

☐ Make paragraphs short. Large chunks of text scare readers off and they may skip important info

☐ Explain steps one at a time. Use a separate paragraph or sentence for each step. Bullets are great and even ok to use in letters to clients.

☐ Break sentences down to be short and informative. Try for only one idea per sentence.

☐ Use positive statements instead of negative (ie- *follow safe practices* is better than *do not follow unsafe practices*)

☐ Do not use too much punctuation. Lists (bulleted or numbered) are better than long sentences with commas or semicolons.

Words:

☐ Are all terms explained or simplified?

☐ Use "you", "me", and "I" vs. "one" or "people"

☐ Use 1 and 2 syllable words as much as possible.

☐ Use easy words. Do not use extra words. Slang can be ok if it is fairly universal.

☐ Avoid contractions unless VERY common like don't or can't. But contractions like "you've", should be written as "you have".

☐ Avoid abbreviations and acronyms – unless VERY commonly known. Always give the full name the first time you use the acronym. MFIP (Minnesota Family Investment Program)

☐ Forget the rules you learned about writing numbers!! Use actual numbers – ie , 2 not two.

Word replacements examples:

complete (the form) → fill out	however → but
whether → if	receive → get
employment → job	difficult → hard
itemize → list	lawful → legal
modify → change	accord → agree
at the present time → now	request → ask for
for the purpose of → to	in favor of → for
prior to → before	in relation to → about
for the reason that → because	in the event that → if