

Your role as a judge in the 2025 Plain Language Awards

This document summarises all you need to know for the judging process in 2025.

The 4 phases of the judging process

Phase 1 — Get set up in Submittable

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| By Monday, 21 July | Judges have created and logged in to their Submittable account and had a panel catch-up. |
| Thursday, 31 July | Entries close. |
| By Friday, 8 August | We (Awards group) check entries for eligibility and assign entries to judges. |

Phase 2 — Decide on a shortlist of entries

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 8–15 August | Judges use the thumbs-up / thumbs-down voting system to decide on a shortlist. Write comments on each entry that doesn't get shortlisted. |
| By 10am, Friday, 15 August | Judges have decided on their shortlist. Lead judges send their shortlist to Megan Bennett — megan@write.co.nz |
| Friday, 15 August | We'll switch from thumbs-up / thumbs-down to reviewing mode for all shortlisted entries. |

Phase 3 – Review and comment on your shortlisted entries / Decide on your finalists and winner

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Between 15 and 22 August | Judges review and comment on all shortlisted entries using Submittable. Judges decide on three finalists, including 1 winner in their category. |
| By 10am Friday, 22 August | Lead judges send Megan their final decision on the three finalists and the winner in their category. |

Phase 4 – Lead judges combine feedback comments and send to us

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Between 22 and 29 August | Lead judges combine feedback comments (called 'reviews' in Submittable) for all shortlisted entries — and make sure the comments are appropriate and helpful. |
| By 5pm Friday, 29 August | Lead judges send Megan combined feedback comments for each shortlisted entry in their category. |

Requirements for each Awards category

Please familiarise yourself with the requirements for your category before you start judging.

[Plain Language Champion — Best Organisation](#)

[Plain Language Champion — Best Individual or Team](#)

[Best Plain Language Document — Public Sector](#)

[Best Plain Language Document — Private Sector](#)

[Best Plain Language Website — Public Sector](#)

[Best Plain Language Website — Private Sector](#)

[Best Plain Language Sentence Transformation](#)

[Best Plain Language Annual Report](#)

[Best Plain Language Legal Document](#)

[Best Plain Language Technical Communicator](#)

[Best Plain Language Turnaround](#)

[People's Choice — Best Plain Language Communication](#)

[People's Choice — Worst Brainstrain Communication](#)

Comment on any user-testing entrants have done

Awards entry forms ask entrants what user-testing they've done for their entry.

When you do your in-depth judging in Phase 3, please comment on the:

- types of user-testing entrants may have used
- evidence of entrants using each type
- impact that the user-testing has had.

We've got more information on our website about the types of user-testing that entrants may have used in their entries.

[What types of user testing do judges look for?](#)

Use these tools in Phase 2 and 3

Use the Rating criteria for shortlisting and in-depth judging

Use the criteria below when you:

- triage the entries to create your shortlist — Phase 2
- assess each entry in depth — Phase 3.

Rating criteria

Excellent — Thought-provoking and inspiring; shows impact

Plain language principles are applied consistently and well. We discovered new ideas and strategies from this entry that we want to use in our own work. We want to tell other people about this entry and think readers and users will tell other people too. We can see the positive impact of this entry for the organisation or its customers.

Very good — Solid use of principles

Applies principles consistently and effectively. Changes we might make would fall into the polishing or nit-picking category. They are unlikely to change the impact of the entry overall. This is a very strong example, but it didn't inspire us to say 'Wow! Look at this one!'

Good — Uses mostly plain language principles but misses subtleties

Mostly uses plain language principles but misses subtleties and opportunities. The entry may get the point across, but putting more focus on plain language principles could measurably improve it.

Fair — Inconsistent use of plain language principles

Uses some plain language principles, but misses other critical ones. May misapply or over-apply strategies. The authors may benefit from training and mentoring.

Poor — Poor or no use of principles

The poor use of plain language principles in this entry interferes with readers' ability to understand and act on the information. If testing was done, it seems to have had little or no impact on the final version.

Use The Write Plain Language Standard for in-depth judging

Use The Write Plain Language Standard below when you assess each entry in depth — Phase 3.

The Write Plain Language Standard


To apply the Standard to any document, first:

- list your reader(s) and describe their context and questions
- write the intended or ideal outcomes for this document.

Then mark 'Yes' or 'Needs work' against the 10 statements below.

| | Yes | Needs work |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 'Big Picture' elements | | |
| 1. The purpose of the document is clear at the start _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. The content supports the purpose of the document _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. The structure of the document is clear and logical to the reader _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. The headings signal the key content _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Language elements | | |
| 5. The paragraphs are mostly short and focused on one topic _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7. The words are precise and familiar _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 8. The tone supports the purpose of the document _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Presentation elements | | |
| 9. The layout and presentation help the reader absorb the message quickly and easily _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 10. The document is error-free and consistent with your style guide _____ | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

write

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Phase 1 — Get set up in Submittable

We use the Submittable platform to manage and judge the Awards entries.

Log in to Submittable if you've judged the Awards previously

Existing judges — make sure you can log in to your Submittable account. Let us know if you have changed your email address since you last used Submittable, and we'll update it.

Create an account in Submittable if you're a new judge

1. You will have received an email saying you've been added as a reviewer to the Plain Language Awards account on Submittable.
2. Click the 'Accept invitation' button in the email from Submittable.
3. Set up a password.

The set-up process should be relatively straightforward. If you run into any problems, ask us for help.

Make sure you can log in to Submittable by 21 July.

You won't see much happening in Submittable until entries close on 31 July. Then we'll:

- check entries for eligibility
- assign entries to your panel — you'll get an email from Submittable each time.

See entries in Submittable

1. When you log in to Submittable, you'll see a list of the entries assigned to your panel.
2. Click on each entry to see the entry form and associated document or website address. Note — the entry form includes questions that the entrant has answered about their entry.
3. Download the entries to your computer, tablet, e-reader, or other device if you like. Choose a download option under the 'Options' tab.

Chat with your panel members

Work out the best way to communicate with your panel members — for example, Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp, Messenger, FaceTime, email, and phone.

Set up a schedule — consider everyone's time zones, constraints, and work and family events.

Phase 2 — Decide on a shortlist of entries

The faster you get through this phase, the sooner your panel can move to the next, more detailed, phase.

Triage your entries to create your shortlist

1. Skim read entries to gain an impression of which should progress to the shortlist.
2. Make a few notes in Submittable as you skim to record your thinking.
3. Use the Rating criteria (page 3) to vote in Submittable:
 - a. thumbs-up — to include on your shortlist all entries that you triage as 'Fair' or above
 - b. thumbs-down — to not include any entries that you triage as 'Poor'.
4. Discuss your selections with your panel to decide on your shortlist.

By Thursday, 14 August — you need to finish this shortlisting phase. If your panel can't decide on a shortlisted entry, our head judge will help you come to a decision.

By 10am Friday, 15 August — lead judges send Megan your shortlist.

All judges in each category must complete thumbs-up / thumbs-down voting before we can switch your category over to reviewing and commenting mode.

We'll send an encouraging generic email to the thumbs-down entries to let them know why they didn't get through this stage.

Phase 3 — Review and comment on your shortlisted entries / Decide on your finalists and winner

In this phase, you review and comment on each entry in depth in Submittable.

Use two tools to do this.

- The Write Plain Language Standard (page 4)
- The Rating criteria — that you used to shortlist (page 3)

Then your panel deliberates and decides on 3 finalists — including 1 winner.

Assess each entry against the Write Plain Language Standard and the Rating criteria

1. Submittable will email you a list of the shortlisted entries and notify you when you can start reviewing them.
2. In this email, click on each entry to open in Submittable — or log in to Submittable and click on ‘Submissions’.
3. Click ‘Start Review’ and read the ‘Guidelines for judges’ under the Review tab.
4. Submittable will prompt you with questions to comment on each element of the Write Plain Language Standard. Answer the prompt questions — these answers are your comments (called ‘reviews’ in Submittable).
5. Submittable will also prompt you to rate each of these elements from Excellent to Poor — using the rating criteria.
6. Work your way through the different criteria — save your draft frequently.
7. Click on ‘Save Draft’ if you want to come back and edit further.
8. Click on ‘Finalize Review’ if you’ve finished — make sure your comments are accurate, clear, well written, and proofread.

Decide on your 3 finalists — including 1 winner

Submittable assigns a numerical value from 5 (Excellent) to 1 (Poor) based on your ratings, which should also reflect your comments. Submittable will combine the ratings from all members of the panel for the category and give an average score for each entry. The final score needs to reflect your assessment of the best entries in your category.

1. With your panel, discuss your ratings and adjust if necessary.
2. Decide on your top three finalists (as long as they’re all worthy of being a finalist).
3. Decide on 1 winner from these finalists.

Your lead judge will manage your decision-making process. Your goal is to achieve consensus, not necessarily unanimity.

By 10am on Friday, 22 August — lead judges send Megan a list of the three finalists, including one winner.

Give quality feedback in your comments

Remember that your feedback comments must be balanced, fair, and helpful. All entrants value expert feedback — your job is to help them do even better by making suggestions and giving examples for improvement.

The way you compose your comments should be with the reader in mind, and in plain language. Your comments should reflect The Write Plain Language Standard.

Feedback goals

As judges, we need to:

- (kindly!) encourage the use of plain language
- provide useful insights that illuminate the value of plain language
- provide helpful suggestions for how entrants could have improved their entry
- exemplify plain language — purposeful, friendly, clear, concise, and well-organised.

Feedback tips

- Couch your feedback around providing value to readers — it's the most important quality of any document.
- When you suggest improvements, include an example when possible.
- We don't need to include improvement suggestions for every criteria (and, typically, we won't need to for finalists).
- It's good to say 'we' in combined feedback when you have consensus. And also good to say 'one judge also noted...' when you don't.

Phase 4 — Lead judges combine feedback comments and send to us

Lead judges combine feedback comments for shortlisted entries and make sure they're appropriate and helpful.

By 10am on Friday, 29 August — lead judges send these comments to Megan.

Once we receive your final reviews, we close Submittable for editing. If you need to make any changes after that, please email us.

We compile overall comments into one summary for each finalist entry and publish these summaries on the Awards website after the ceremony.

And we send your combined reviews to the shortlisted entrants after the ceremony.

Finally — celebrate with us!

Once you've completed the 4 phases, the only thing left is to join us at our ceremony where we announce our winners!

Friday, 19 September — we'll announce finalists online.

Thursday, 30 October — we'll announce winners on at our Plain Language Awards ceremony, held in the beautiful rooms of Parliament in Wellington, New Zealand.

We'd love you to join us, but if you can't make it, we'll also livestream the event. We hope you'll join us to celebrate, one way or the other!

Thanks to all of you for everything you've done and will be doing!