

The 10-Point Cognitive Load Audit

Pass/Fail criteria for QRG readability. Use before you publish to catch cognitive overload.

Cognitive load is the enemy of job aids. If the user's brain is overloaded, they won't use your guide. Run through this audit for every quick reference guide before publishing.

HOW TO USE

Review each criterion against your draft. Mark Pass or Fail. If you have more than 2 Fails, revise before publishing. The goal: the user finds the answer in under 10 seconds.

Audit Criteria

#	CRITERION	PASS	FAIL
1	Findability: Can the user locate the answer in under 10 seconds?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Section length: Is each section under 50 words?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Bullet depth: Are there no more than 3 bullet levels (or nested lists)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Single idea: Does each section convey one main idea only?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Scannable headers: Are headers action-oriented and descriptive (not vague)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	No walls of text: Are bullets/tables used instead of long prose paragraphs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Visual hierarchy: Is the H1 > H2 > H3 structure clear and consistent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Above the fold: Is critical info on the first page or visible without scrolling?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#	CRITERION	PASS	FAIL
9	Jargon: Is jargon minimized or defined when unavoidable?	[]	[]
10	White space: Is there adequate spacing? (Not cramped or dense)	[]	[]

PASS THRESHOLD

Aim for 8+ Pass marks. If 3 or more criteria fail, compress the content, split into multiple guides, or simplify the structure before publishing.

Quick Fixes

✓ DO

- Cut words that don't change behavior
- Use tables for comparisons
- Lead with the answer, then context
- Test with a real user: time to find key info

✗ DON'T

- Bury the answer in paragraph 3
- Use more than 3 bullet levels
- Mix formats inconsistently (e.g. bold in one section, italics in another)
- Assume the user will read top to bottom