

String Similarity Evaluation Guidelines for New gTLD Program: 2026 Round

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[The report](#)

NSCG welcomes the publication of the updated String Similarity Evaluation (SSE) Guidelines and appreciates ICANN org's continued efforts to improve clarity, predictability, and scalability in the evaluation of applied-for strings. The two-stage approach, combining pre-screening with expert panel review, appropriately reflects both the scale of the 2026 Round and the need for informed human judgment.

Clarity and Transparency

The Guidelines clearly articulate the scope of string similarity as focusing on visual confusability, distinct from semantic or phonetic similarity. This distinction is helpful and aligns with prior policy work. To further support transparency, it would be beneficial to clearly document how the SSE Panel may override or diverge from the SSE Tool output, including the criteria or considerations typically relied upon during manual review.

Use of SSE Tool and Data

The development of the SSE Tool and the publication of the underlying similarity data are positive steps toward consistency and predictability. As reflected in earlier community feedback, access to indicative tool outputs, at least in a limited or explanatory form, could help applicants better understand potential risks before submission and reduce avoidable contention cases.

While the Guidelines clarify that the SSE Tool is intended as a pre-screening mechanism, the level of information available to applicants regarding its methodology, thresholds, and use of similarity data remains limited. Greater transparency around how the tool informs subsequent panel review would support predictability and allow applicants to better assess potential risks prior to submission.

Scripts, Variants, and Evolving Risk

Given the reliance on the Root Zone Label Generation Rules and script expert input, the Guidelines would benefit from explicitly describing how updates to scripts, rendering environments, or newly identified confusable patterns will be incorporated over time. A documented mechanism for periodic review and update would strengthen long-term robustness without reopening policy questions.

Procedural Predictability

Finally, while the Guidelines are primarily technical, brief references to available recourse or review mechanisms, where relevant, would improve applicant understanding of the overall process flow and reinforce confidence in consistent application across cases.

The Guidelines appropriately limit the scope of string similarity to visual confusability. However, it would be useful to clarify how this technical focus interacts with other evaluation processes that may consider geographic, cultural, or community dimensions. Improved cross-referencing could help avoid unintended cumulative impacts on certain categories of applicants.

Given that SSE outcomes directly influence contention set formation, the absence of a clearly defined review or clarification step within the SSE process itself may raise concerns for applicants. Introducing a narrowly scoped mechanism for procedural clarification or reconsideration could enhance confidence without reopening substantive policy questions.

Role of Automation and Human Judgment

The increasing reliance on automated pre-screening highlights the importance of clearly articulating how human expert judgment is applied downstream. Explicit guidance on the weight given to tool outputs versus panel discretion would help ensure that automation supports, rather than effectively determines, evaluation outcomes.

Accessibility and Applicant Diversity

Finally, the overall design of the SSE process should be assessed in light of ICANN's broader objectives related to global participation and applicant diversity. Ensuring that evaluation mechanisms are understandable, predictable, and procedurally accessible is particularly important for applicants with limited financial or legal resources.

Overall, the Guidelines represent a solid and policy-consistent foundation for the 2026 Round. Continued emphasis on transparency, documented discretion, and adaptability will be key to maintaining trust in the string similarity evaluation process as the DNS continues to evolve.