

Plain Language and Applied Linguistics

An integrated view on
Technical Communication

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Agenda

- Academic research and Plain Language advocates/practitioners – mutual understanding is important and useful for both sides
- Goals for an integrated approach
 - Inter- and transdisciplinary thinking
 - Technical Communication in a very broad sense
 - „Language awareness“ for non-professional writers
- An integrated model – bringing together academic research and practical needs
- Some final remarks on „plainness“ of Plain Language



What is „plain language“?

A broadly accepted definition reads as follows:

“A communication is in plain language **if it meets the needs of its audience** – by using language, structure, and design so clearly and effectively that the audience has the best possible chance of readily **finding** what they need, **understanding** it, and **using** it“. (Cheek 2010: 5)

„teleological“ definition
(reason for something in
function of its end)



What is the theory „behind“ Plain Language?

Basis: Reading research
(since 1920-ies); relatively simplistic
quantitative approaches

Basis: Stylistics, rhetorics, design
(old tradition since antiquity); danger
of arbitrariness („hard“ empirical value
sometimes doubtful, e.g. passive voice)

- Formula-based definitions → readability
- Elements-focused definitions → style guides, checklists
- Outcomes-focused definitions → evaluation

Basis: empirical user research
(qualitative & quantitative), user
experience, usability evaluation
and testing



Plain Language is a relevant topic in different disciplines (stemming from natural and social sciences, humanities, arts)

- Terminology, LSP, rhetorics, stylistics (applied linguistics)
- Technical communication in the narrow sense (technical writing)
- Cognitive psychology, cognitive science
- Usability engineering, ergonomics
- Organizational communication (communication science)
- Marketing & PR (economics)
- Information design, graphic design
- ...



A „common theory“ of Plain Language?

- The different approaches are all relevant and provide important insights, but are too divergent for a consistent and common theory
- An „**eclectic approach**“ seems to be useful:
 - Look beyond your own horizon, be open for other disciplines
 - Pay attention to „real world problems“ and the needs of the people involved
 - Take the concepts and tools which make sense and are useful
 - Reflect your insights in a self-critical way
- Transdisciplinary models are necessary (which means more than interdisciplinarity)



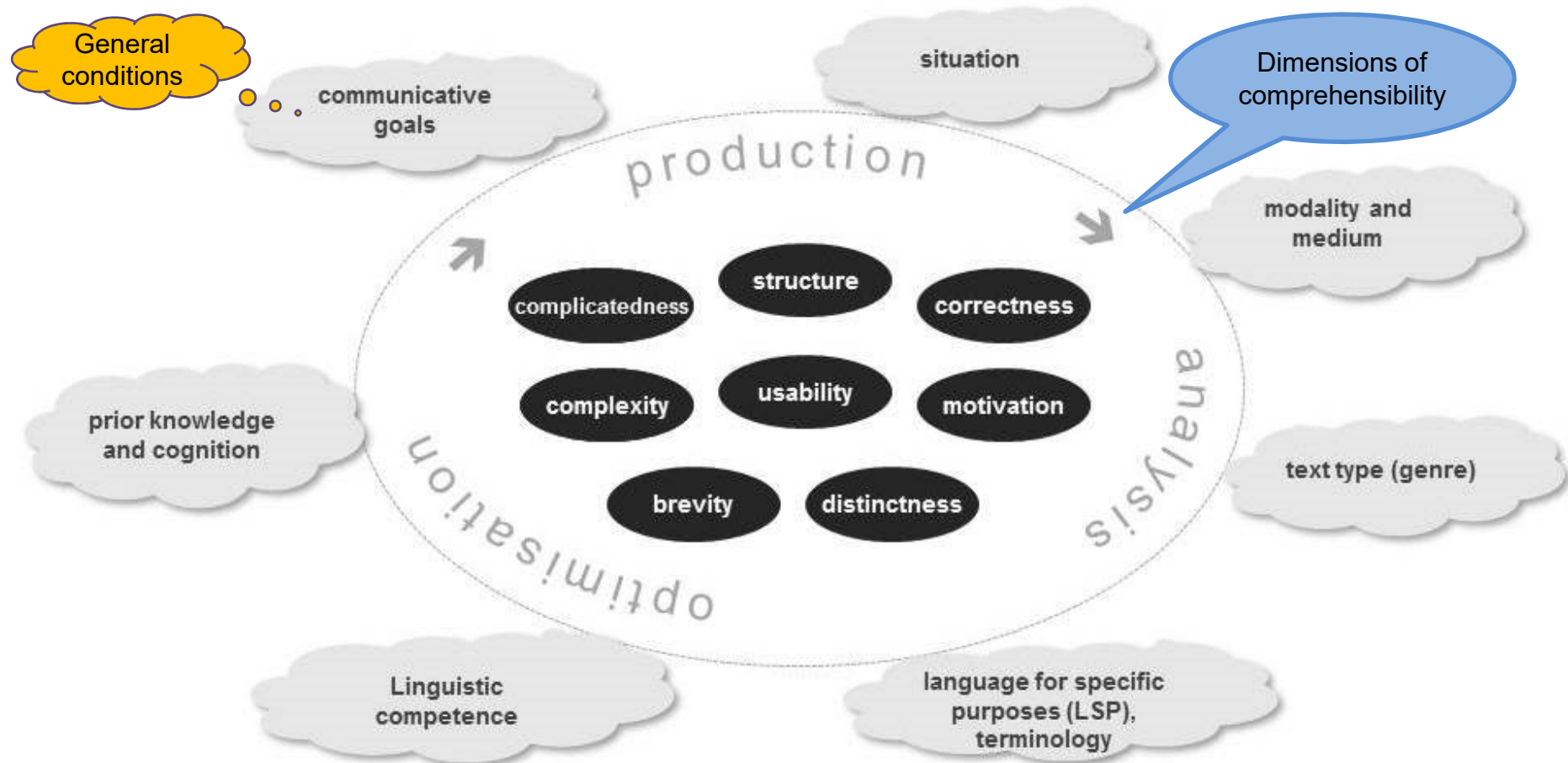
A model for comprehensible knowledge communication (written technical communication in the broader sense)

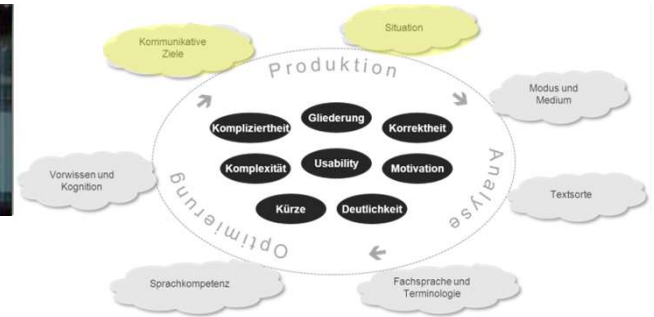
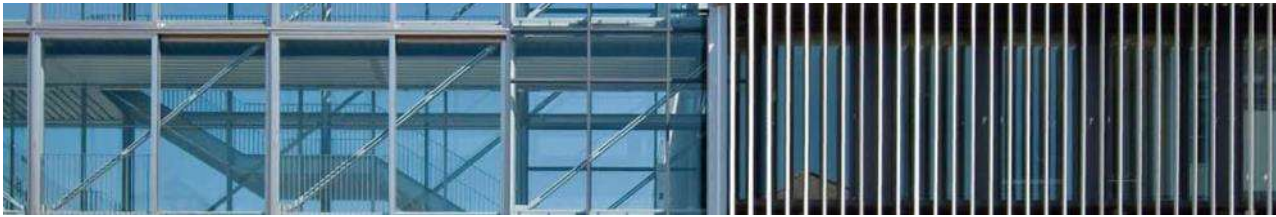
- Based on linguistic research as well as on cognitive science, info design and usability engineering
- Enhance “language awareness” on a more detailed level than widespread style guides and checklists
- Useful for non-scientists, avoiding scientific jargon, explaining general principles
- Support the whole cycle:
Writing process – analysis of existing texts – optimization





General conditions and dimensions of comprehensibility



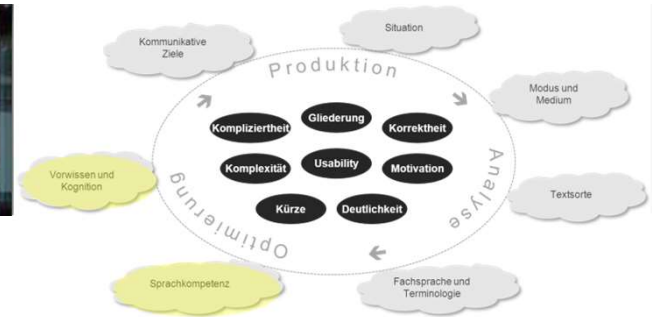
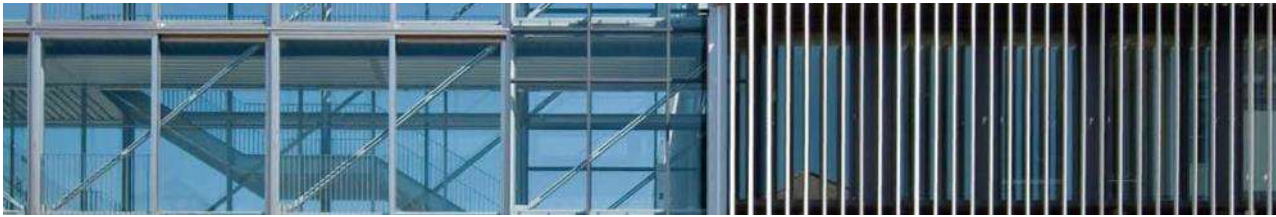


Communicative goals and situation

- Analysis of communicative goals
 - Task Analysis: What do the readers really need?
Operate a device, obtain an overview, look up details, decide, ...
 - Correspondence of goals between writer $\leftrightarrow$ reader
 - Analysis of target groups, if heterogeneous: multiple addressing

- Analysis of the concrete situation when reading / writing
 - Mounting snow chains
 - Fill in a form in an office
 - Enter patient data while being in an emergence vehicle
 - Concept of *Situated Cognition*

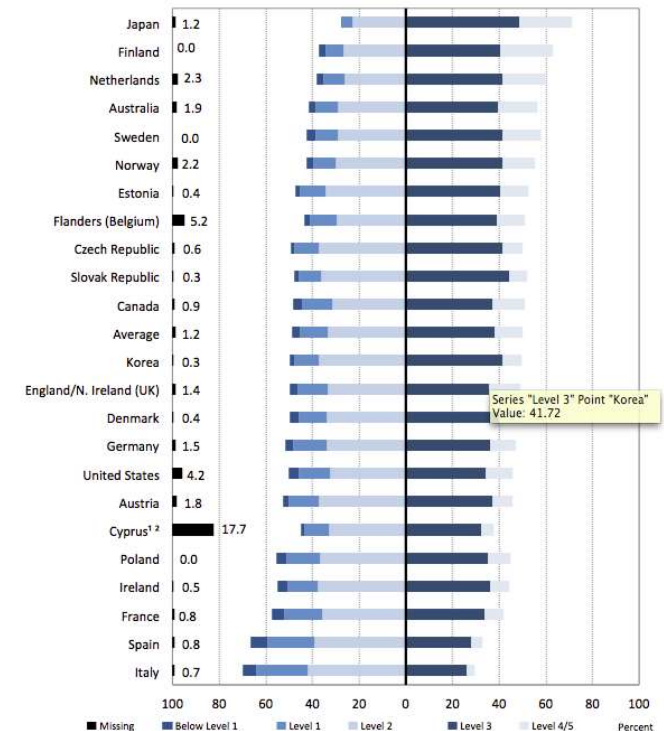


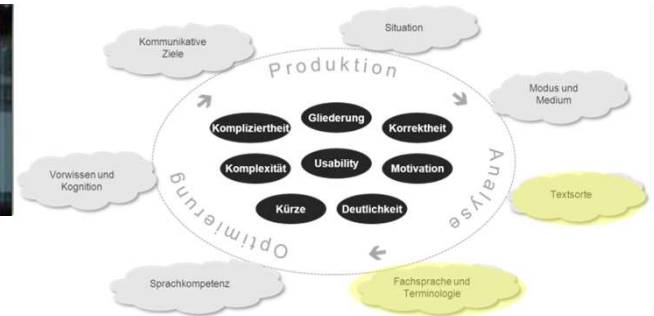


Linguistic competence, prior knowledge, and cognition

- ~ 20% „functionally illiterate persons“ in OECD (PISA, PIAAC)
- Global business: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF, BELF)
- Accessibility and easy-to-read (impaired persons)
- Migrants and communication
- Cognitive science aspects
 - comprehension does not work on a „tabula rasa“*
 - episodic vs. semantic memory, scripts*
 - limitations of working memory*
 - fluency and priming (cf. Moses-Illusion)*
 - cognitive ease, desirable difficulties*

Literacy proficiency among 16-65 years-olds
Percentage of adults scoring at each proficiency level in literacy

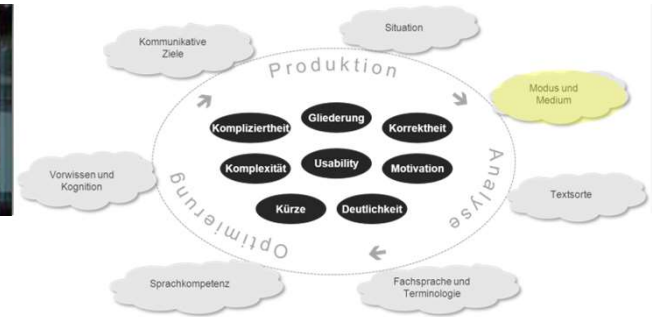
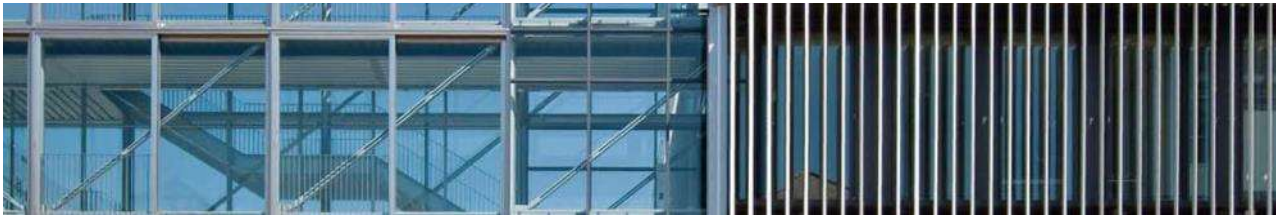




Genres, languages for special purposes, and terminology

- Different **genres** support writing and understanding (learned patterns), e.g. *minutes, requirements specification, order confirmation, complaint, official notification, ...*
- Consolidation through **document templates**, examples, sample solutions, text/graphics building blocks
- Suitable degree of LSP-“specificity”
- **Terminology** and **abbreviations**
Glossaries, norms, visibility in the text
- Suitable degree of **standardization**
controlled languages, forms, ...

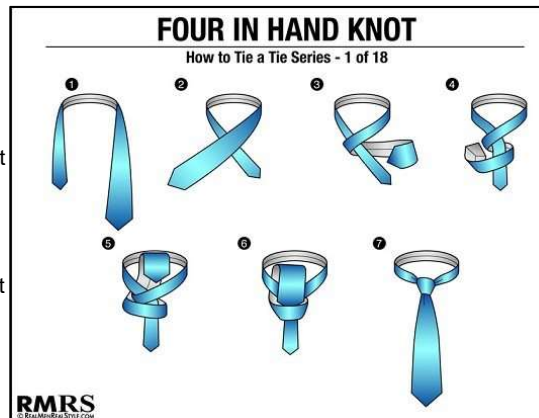
KIM-Sitzung (Lehre)			Donau-Universität Krems Fakultät für Kommunikation und Globalisierung
Datum (Zeit): 27.03.2012, 11:00 Uhr Raum: Redaktionsraum Moderation: FH Anwesend: KIM-Lehre-Team (ohne u.a.) Entschuldigt:			Protokoll-FührerInnen-Einteilung 2012 JAN: PW (Petra Wimmer) JUL: AS (Andrea Schütz) FEB: PW (Petra Wimmer) AUG: AS (Andrea Schütz) MAR: FH (Florian Halm) SEP: BL (Benedikt Lutz) APR: FH (Florian Halm) OKT: BL (Benedikt Lutz) MAI: CW (Cornelia Wied) NOV: NN (Nikola Neumayer) JUN: CW (Cornelia Wied) DEZ: NN (Nikola Neumayer)
AGENDA-FIXPUNKTE	WER	DETAILS	
Aktuelles aus den Lehrgängen	alle		
Interessenten-/Bewerbungsstatistik	CW	Im Marketing werden wöchentliche Auswertungen durchgeführt (Conny). Abgelegt und aktuell gehalten unter: G:KIM/Lehre	
Bericht aus KIM-LGL-Runde	BL	Protokolle werden abgelegt unter: G:KIM/KIM-Allgemein/Meetings/KIM-LGL Offene Agendapunkte werden in eigenem File gesammelt: G:KIM/KIM-Allgemein/Meetings/KIM-LGL/Agenda-Sammeldatei.docx ToDo: Bericht aus dem Workshop für Außenauftritt	
AKTUELLE THEMEN	WER	DETAILS	
Reserve-Modultermine 12W	PW	Chronologisch Termine befüllen, oder 1. und 3. ToDo LGL: Besprechung in LGL Sitzung ToDo MUK: nimmt den Punkt in Prozess-Lehre auf (Prozessbeschreibung) ToDo BL: Überprüft den Fragebogen ToDo PW: Überprüft den Fragebogen	
JG-Evaluierung über EvaSys in die KIM-Lehre aufnehmen	MW		



Modality and medium

- Communication mode
Text, picture, combination of text and pictures, video, sound,...
- Media
Printed, on-screen, iPad, Smartphone, Google Glass, MS Hololens,...
- Example: Instruction how to tie a tie

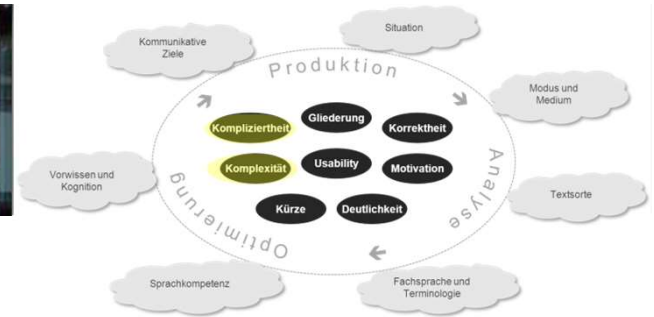
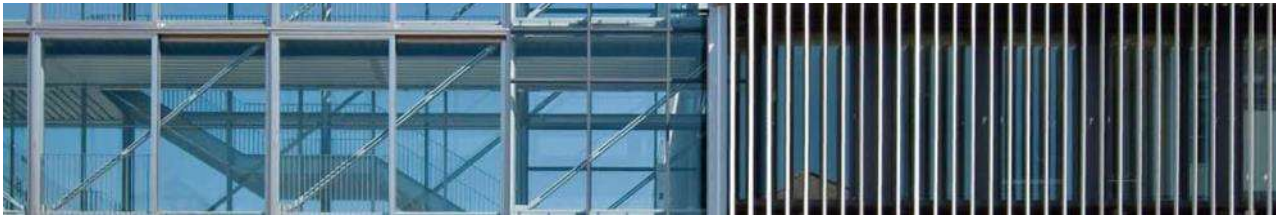
1. Drape the tie around your collar with the seam facing inward and the thick end on your left, two or three inches lower than your desired finishing position.
2. Bring the thick end horizontally across the front of the narrow end, and then pass it back horizontally behind the narrow end.
3. Pass the thick end again across the front of the knot from left to right.
4. Now pass the thick end again behind the knot horizontally from right to left.
5. Pass the thick end AGAIN across the front of the knot from left to right. Slip a finger under this third horizontal loop.
6. Bring the tip of the thick end up underneath the loop around your collar and feed it up behind the knot, down over the front of the knot and through that third horizontal loop.
7. Pull the thick end through the horizontal loop and snug it down.
8. Adjust the tie by holding the knot in one hand and pulling gently on the narrow end with the other.



<https://www.realmenrealstyle.com/how-to-tie-a-tie/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAg7z6u4NE8>

> 61 Mio clicks

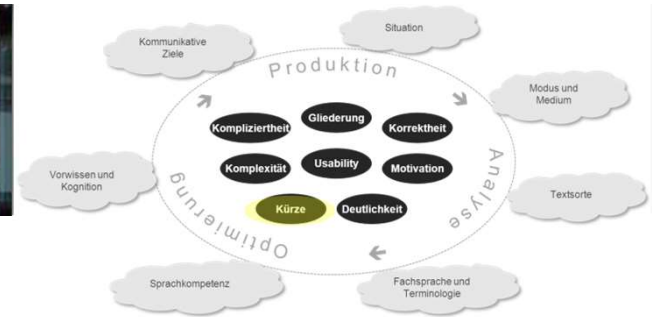
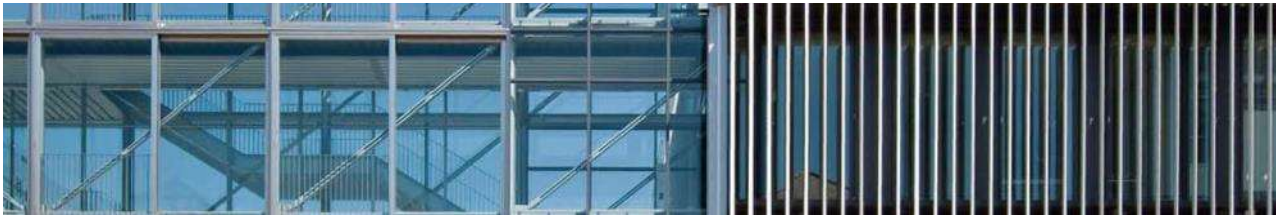


Complexity vs. complicatedness

- **Complexity** is about **content**
→ should be **optimized**, according to communicative goals and target group
- **Complicatedness** is about **external appearance**
→ should be **minimized** (stylistics, plain language → cognitive ease)

The law as an example:

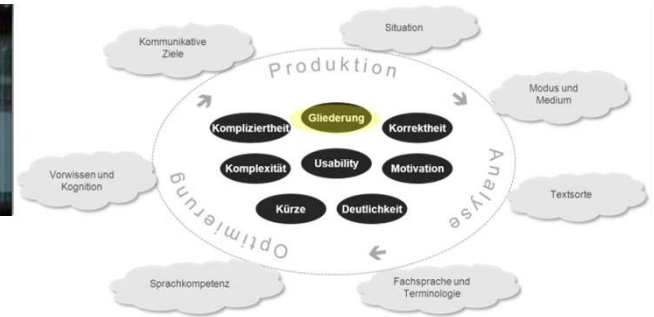
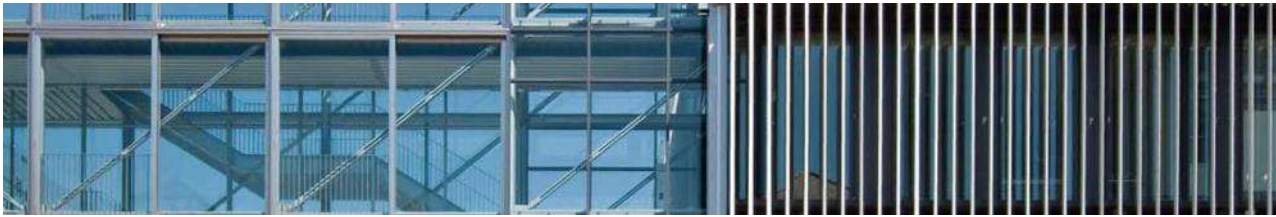
- There may be good reasons for **complex content**, e.g. social insurance law: political compromises, transitional regulations, exceptions, hardship cases,...
- There is no functional reason for the **long and complex sentences** in laws, which reduce significantly comprehensibility (cognitive ease)



Brevity

- Information vs. redundancy
- Tradeoff depending on communicative goals, prior knowledge of readers, and text type
- Balancing cognitive profit and loss:
Examples, explanations, narrative elements, announcements and summaries,... make texts longer
- Very important for online hypertexts
„granularity“ of units (pages)
internal cohesion of units
local or global optimization
to link or to copy?

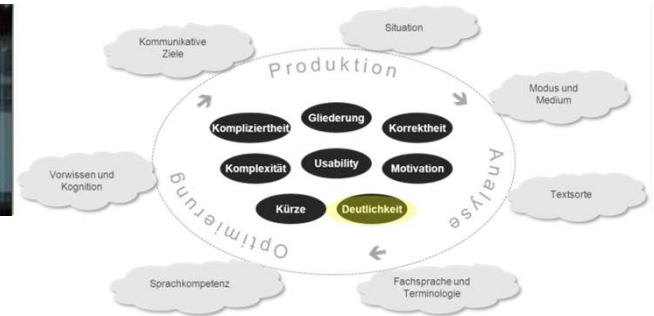
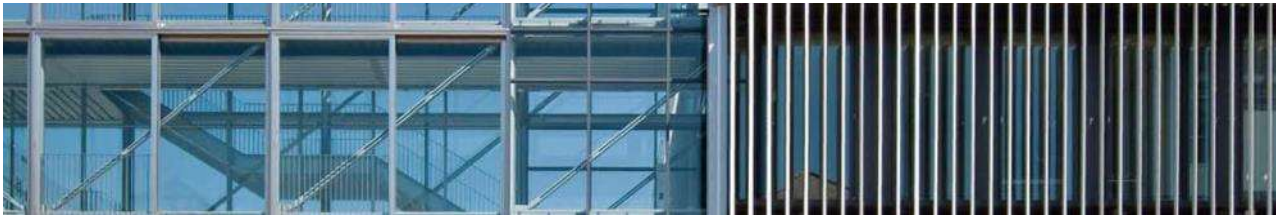
*„I did not have time enough to
write a short letter...“
Goethe, Voltaire, Cicero, Mark Twain....*



Structure

- In technical texts extremely important
 - Supports orientation
 - Selective reading, referencing, linking
 - Congruence between expression and content
- Examples:
 - Advance organizing
 - Headlines
 - Numbering
 - Visualizations
 - Paragraphs
 - Margin columns

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Distinctness

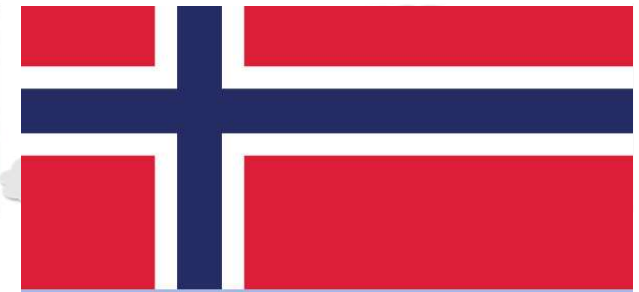
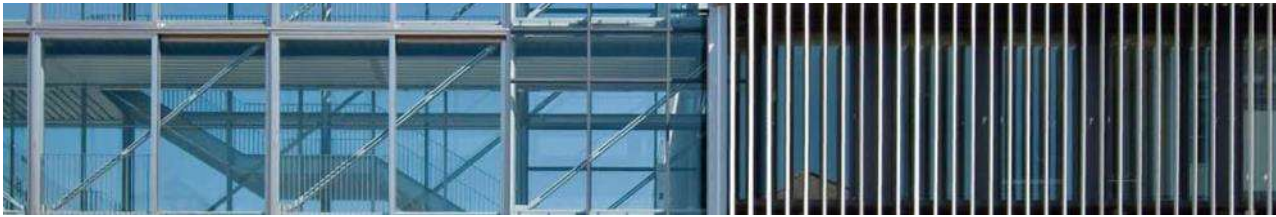
- Getting attention on **content level** - important content should be emphasized by appropriate means
- Verbal / graphic / typographic means (attention: habituation effects, e.g. blinking texts)
- Example: fire extinguisher

The action oriented emergency description is most important (1 – 2 – 3)

Everything else should be in the background

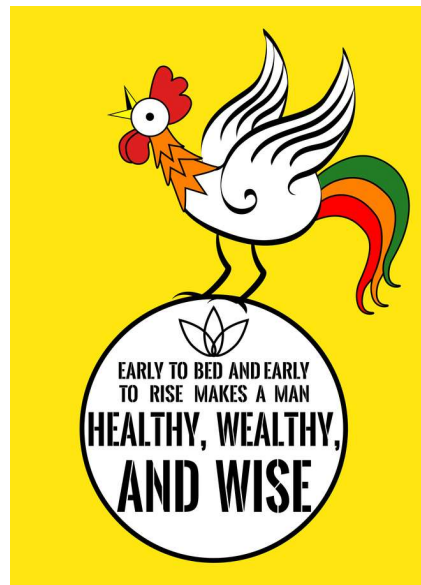
In this case:
 A – B – C competes with 1 – 2 – 3;
 The word of caution is confusing
 Text parts in competition with one another





Motivation

- Getting attention on **emotional level**
- Text generated motivation (cognitive anchoring)
 - Examples, stories, jokes, proverbs, cartoons
 - Metaphors, rhymes, „poetic function“ of language
 - „good“ names
 - Serious gaming, learning simulations



https://miro.medium.com/max/1838/1*4vX3IH51Lc8T-7ptDHRv2w.png

Funny Norwegian Expressions



Å snakke rett fra leveren

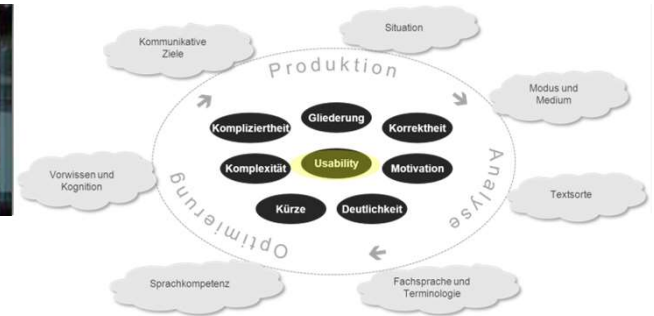
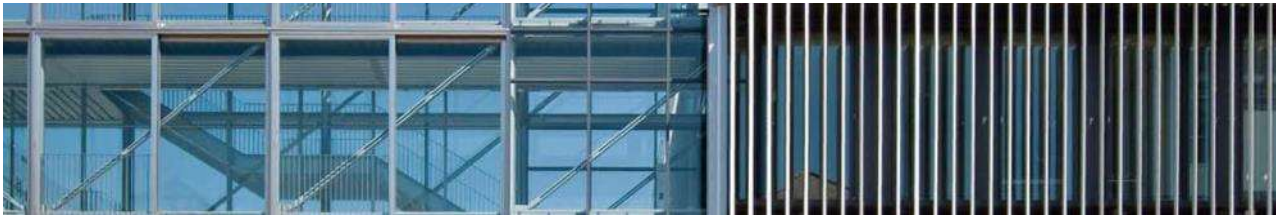
TRANSLATION:

To speak directly from the liver.

MEANING:

To speak plainly/truthfully without sugar-coating.

theintrepidguide.com



Usability

- Important when texts are action-oriented
User manuals, rules of games, package leaflets, forms
- „Discount methods“, thinking aloud, card sorting
- Finding „good“ (expressive) terms
- „The user is always right“
- Orientation: <http://www.nngroup.com/>



<https://www.readability.co.uk/patient-information-leaflets/>



Jakob Nielsen

"The Guru of Web Page Usability" (New York Times)



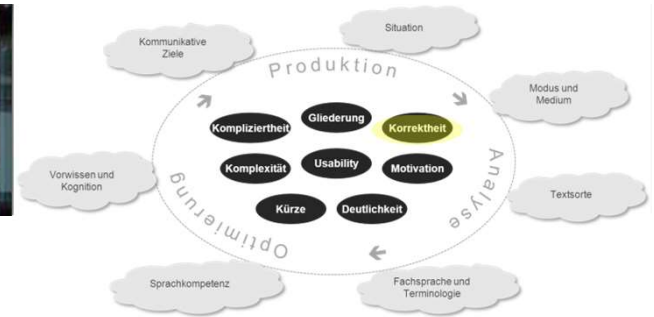
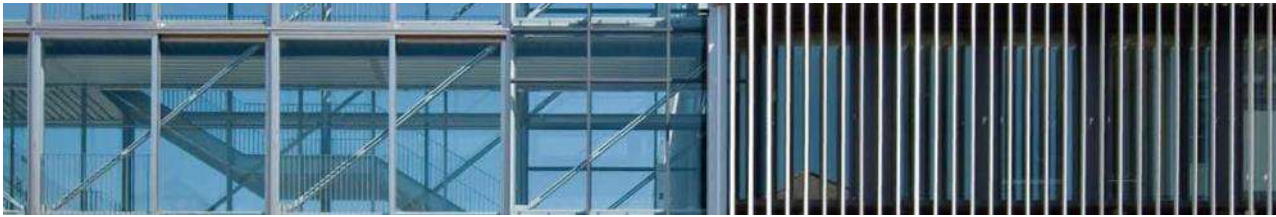
Don Norman

"The Guru of Workable Technology" (Newsweek)



Bruce "Tog" Tognazzini

"The User Interface Guru" (Wired)



Correctness

- Correctness is an extra topic – not a core topic of comprehensibility (incorrect texts might be quite comprehensible...)
- Important quality feature of technical texts
- **Reviews** with all stakeholders
- Role based reading (different perspectives)
- Checklists are useful
- Documentation of results (for process improvement)



<http://chasegame.net/time-for-review/>



Recommendations how to apply the model /1

1. Environment analysis of existing text: **general conditions, qualitative approach**

- Which communicative goals are important (for you, for the readers)?
- What does the exact reading situation look like?
- Which modes of presentation and which media are applied; are there alternatives?
- Is the genre (text type) stable and familiar to the readers; suitable for the content?
- LSP/terminology: which depth is necessary/reasonable/acceptable?
- What about the linguistic competence of readers (international environment, migrants, children,...)?
- What level of pre-existing knowledge can be expected, are there specific cognitive strains?



Recommendations how to apply the model /2

2. Current and target profile in the **8 dimensions, quantitative approach**

Simple quantification of strengths and weaknesses,
5 step model works well

Advisable: first working alone,
then discussion/adjustment in small groups

Discussion is more important than
“correct grades”

3. Rewrite the text

	current profile	target profile
complexity	-	0
complicatedness	-	+
brevity	+	+
structure	+	++
distinctness	+	+
motivation	-	0
correctness	++	++
usability	+	++



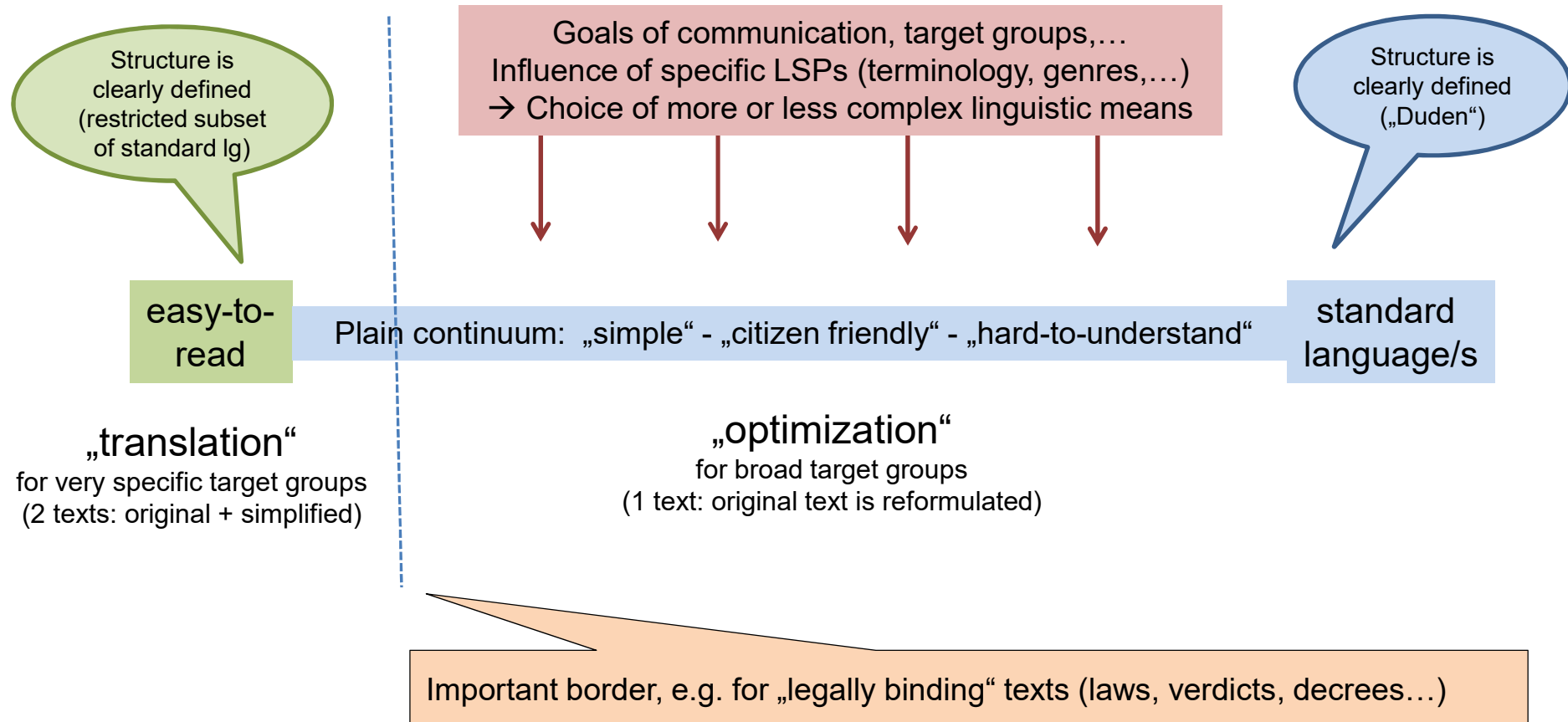
Interesting topics for discussion

The plainer, the better?

- Should we „**optimize**“ or „**translate**“ original texts?
When „optimizing“, we have one text at the end (an „improved“ original“);
when „translating“, we have two different texts (original and simplified)
- Should we **simplify** content, what are the criteria for simplification, and how far should we go? (target groups?)
- Are there **discrete steps** or a **continuum** between „heavy“ and „light“ languages?
→ good arguments for a continuum, depending on goals of communication, target groups, text type, different LSPs and necessary terminology



Tentative answers in this discussion





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attention!

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