Standards, training, certification: An update from the International Plain Language Federation
Onwards and upwards

Margrethe Kvarenes
PLAIN President

I have borrowed the mantra of Christopher Balmford, project leader of the group of experts developing the ISO standard for plain language: "Onwards and upwards!" After having participated in our recent global conference, Access for All – Plain Language is a Civil Right, I see this mantra as the perfect description of the spirit of the field of plain language. We are growing in size, in scope, in knowledge, and in engagement. At our May conference over 400 participants from close to 40 countries, shared their practices, dilemmas, success stories, and concerns.

PLAIN in the years to come

Taking all the input into account, I see that PLAIN is right on target with the new strategic plan that we will present to our members for a vote during our upcoming Annual General Meeting.

The plan is based on your input through a member survey and one-to-one interviews. It outlines goals within 6 areas:

Regional coordination and development: Through our new committee we will build geography- and language-based regional networks for plain language. Part of this goal outlines the plan has served us well! During the past years Neil has graciously shaped this e-journal as the Founding Editor. Together with PLAIN board members he tailored the content to cover plain language in several languages and through stories from across the world. The journal now is a main member asset and a solid pillar in the spirit of the field of plain language. We are growing. In size, in scope, in knowledge, and in engagement. At our May conference over 400 participants from close to 40 countries, shared their practices, dilemmas, success stories, and concerns.

Conferences: We plan to offer both in-person and virtual conferences, but also provide more informal networking opportunities for our members.

Finance and governance: We are continuing to professionalize our operations so that we can become more strategy-focused and targeted in our work.

Communications: We will make improvements to our website and member portal, provide possibilities for members to connect, and develop a communication plan to provide our members with regular, helpful information.

Professional development: Within the context of the International Plain Language Federation, we will work towards implementing the ISO standard and facilitate professional development for members through several avenues.

I look forward to formalizing the plan and putting it into action with my fellow PLAIN board members.

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Introduction

Hannah Sapunor-Davis
Managing Editor
PLAIN e-journal

At our recent online conference, Access for All: Plain Language is a Civil Right, board members of the International Plain Language Federation shared the ongoing work of this umbrella organization for plain language. Some highlights of these discussions include:

- how the work on the ISO standard is progressing, and how the working group has asked the International Standardization Organization to use “you” in the standard, which has never been done in an ISO standard before
- how the Federation is exploring ways to help countries implement the standard once it’s adopted
- how feedback from PLAIN’s members about training and resources has led the Federation to explore the possibilities of guidelines and programs for plain language professionals.

The Federation’s current priorities are standards, training, and certification. We wanted to highlight all of the impressive progress that has been made so far in this issue of the e-journal. Furthermore, this issue will be made available to everyone, not just our members, in the hopes to promote the international advancement of plain language for everyone.

To get us started, Chair? Vera Gergely sets us up with an overview of the Federation, including the why, how, and what of it all. For those of us (myself included) with little knowledge of how international standards are developed, Christopher Balmford’s article about the mechanics behind this process is enlightening.

Then, we have some updates from various Federation committees. Gael Spivak discusses how this standard can be implemented at the national level, and how it might look different around the world.

In effort to professionalize plain language, the Certification Committee has been hard at work researching the most effective and sustainable way towards certification, as outlined by Neil James.

And how could someone potentially reach certification? Training is one approach, and David Lipscomb reviews a few methods and resources that the Training Committee has examined so far, along with their next steps.

But before all that, there was the definition, a cornerstone to international plain language. Annetta Cheek gives an overview of the detailed work that went into sculpting this short and seemingly simple text, which has been a critical tool for a lot of us.

And just in case you need more convincing that a standard for plain language is something to get behind, Cheryl Stephens, co-founder of PLAIN, shares some fascinating neuroscience behind reading and processing information.

And finally, we have 3 perspectives from our members who are on the frontlines of the plain language movements in Europe. Lorenzo Carpanè (Italy), Natalia Nechaeva and Emma Kairova (Russia), and Uwe Roth (Germany) share the challenges of advocating for plain language in their respective countries while also discussing the progress made towards reaching a common understanding and expectation of clear communication.

We hope to highlight more work and perspectives like theirs from our members around the world. Do you have something to share about the state of plain language in your country or language? Be sure to keep your eye out for calls for contributions for future issues or send an email to Plain.

Last but not least, I would like to take a moment to say thank you to our intrepid Editor-in-Chief Neil James, who got this e-journal off the ground along with Joanna Richardson in 2019. Thanks to his knowledge, network and intuition for useful content, the journal is now one of PLAIN’s major membership assets, documenting and spreading information about plain language across the globe. I will be taking over his duties now, and I only hope that I can fill his shoes. I know that with the generosity and enthusiasm from our members, it will be a pleasure.

Hannah Sapunor-Davis
is a freelance editor and English teacher, who is originally from the United States and is based in Germany. She is currently the chair of the Communications Committee on the PLAIN Board of Directors.

Thank you to sponsors of the Access for All: Plain Language is a Civil Right conference

Presenting sponsor

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The International Plain Language Federation: An overview

Why is this distinction important?

- **Movements** are usually run by volunteers, who tend to work for free and are not measured against any standard.
- **Professions**, on the other hand, have professionals who have to undergo some form of training and may need to be certified. Their work is measured against standards, and they definitely do not work for free.

The 3 organizations set up the Federation because they realized it would be better to work together on these issues – all the while involving the wider plain language community. Second, I want to emphasize the phrase “around the world.” The international field of plain language was historically dominated by English-language practitioners. The conferences are usually held in English, our journals are in English, and I myself am writing these words in English even though it’s not my native language. Yet most people on Earth use a language other than English.

We need to make sure that other languages and cultures are equally represented and considered when developing plain language as a profession.

How does the Federation work?

Under its constitution, the Federation’s only members are the 3 founding organizations (the Center, Clarity, and PLAIN). Individuals cannot be members of the Federation. The Federation is governed by a board, which is made up of the following representatives:

- the presidents/chairs of the 3 member organizations
- a second representative from each of the 3 organizations
- the chair, appointed by the 3 presidents/chairs (previous chairs of the Federation were Dr. Neil James and Dr. Annette Cheek, both of whom are still involved today)
- 6 country and language representatives appointed by the previous 6 board members and the chair, to make the board truly international. (These are currently from Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, and the United States.)

The Federation is not a legally incorporated organization, and it is fully run by volunteers on its board and committees.

The Federation is essentially a mechanism for its member organizations to work on issues that are best accomplished together. It does not oversee the 3 member organizations. The 3 presidents decide annually what the Federation should be working on the next year.

A key principle is that the Federation may not compete with its member organizations and may not knowingly harm the organizations or their members’ interests. For instance, the Federation will not offer training to the public because then it would be competing with plain language practitioners – although it might in the future offer guidelines for training.

Equally importantly, the Federation is always actively looking for feedback from the plain language community. This can take various forms:

- more than 60 volunteers from the 3 member organizations contributing their expertise
- regular reports on our work at plain language conferences
- articles in the Clarity Journal or the PLAIN e-journal, such as in this issue.

We’re always eager to listen, so please tell us what you think about the Federation’s work.

What is the Federation working on?

The underlying agenda for the Federation was set out in the Clarity Journal 64 published in 2010, also known as the “options paper.” If you haven’t read this, I strongly encourage you to do so. The options paper explores the most prominent questions relating to 7 priorities:

1. Defining plain language
2. Setting international standards
3. Training practitioners
4. Grounding plain language in research
5. Advocating for plain language
6. Certifying practitioners
7. Strengthening our institutional structure.

Our first step was defining plain language. We needed common agreement on what plain language is before doing anything else. At the time, there were dozens of slightly (or wildly) differing definitions, so we needed to reach a consensus.

Since 2014, we have had a commonly accepted definition of plain language, available on the Federation’s website along with translations into many other languages.

The next step was setting international standards. While a definition was crucial, we needed a more detailed understanding of what makes a document plain. That’s why the Federation initiated a plain language standard through the International Standards Organization (ISO), which is due to be published at the end of 2021.

The definition of plain language serves as the cornerstone of the standard. The standard was built on the expertise of 50+ international plain language experts who formed the ISO Working Group, as well as feedback from the wider community.

With the standard soon to be published, the member organizations decided that the Federation should next focus on 3 areas in our agenda:

1. localization and implementation of the standard
2. training
3. certification.

To progress this, we put out a call for volunteers among the members of the Center, Clarity, and PLAIN. We already had one committee working on the standard, and now we have formed 3 more committees to investigate and work on the new areas. You can read more about their work in the following articles in this journal.

The Federation has accomplished a lot since 2007, but we still have a long way to go to achieve “professionalization of plain language around the world.” However, the number of volunteers and the enthusiasm they bring makes me confident that we’re on the right track. I’d like to thank everyone serving on the committees, on the board, and on the ISO Working Group. We couldn’t do it without you.

Vera Gergely embarked on the ambitious task of introducing plain language in Hungary in 2014. Since then, they have worked as a freelancer, offering plain language editing and training to companies. Vera also wrote a comprehensive guide on how to write clearly in Hungarian. Vera has chaired the International Plain Language Federation since 2020. Vera also serves on the Drafting Committee of the ISO Working Group 11 for international plain language standards, is a Board member of PLAIN International, and a country representative for Clarity International. They love bouldering and reading fantasy and science-fiction. Vera holds a master’s degree in economics.

Vera Gergely
Chair, International Plain Language Federation

The International Plain Language Federation was founded in 2007 by the Plain Language Association International (PLAIN), the Center for Plain Language, and Clarity International. Originally, it was called the International Plain Language Working Group, but it adopted the name of a Federation in 2011.

Why was the Federation founded?

The Federation’s underlying mission is to professionalize plain language around the world. There are 2 key aspects to this goal.

Let’s look at “professionalization” first. Plain language started out as a movement advocating for citizens’ rights and reduced bureaucracy. It emphasized benefits for the public and people’s right to understand. These arguments still hold true, but recent decades have seen a shift toward understanding plain language not as a movement (or not just as a movement) but more as a profession.
A language-neutral plain language standard — A tool for us all

Plain language experts

ISO's plain language project was initiated by the International Plain Language Federation, which PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language formed in 2007.

In 2019, the Federation proposed to Standards Australia that it develop an international plain language standard. Standards Australia decided this would best be developed internationally. So, in June 2019, Standards Australia proposed to ISO that it develop the standard. ISO approved that proposal.

The Federation has a blog telling the story of the journey to the plain language standard and explaining how you can be involved. The blog includes 7 videos of the standards-related sessions from the October 2020 Access for All conference. Videos about our progress from the May 2021 Access for All conference should be available soon.

Plain language experts – including more than 10 PLAIN members – are on the ISO working group developing the plain language standard. Those experts were appointed by their country’s national standards body. ISO has also appointed PLAIN, Clarity, the Center, and the International Institute of Information Design as a Liaison Organization to the working group. This is something of a big deal. Each Liaison Organization can appoint a representative who can:

• attend and speak at meetings to express the Liaison Organization’s views
• see, and comment on, drafts of the standard.

To help a Liaison Organization form its views on drafts of the standard, it can seek input from its members. PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center did this during 2020. (The IIBD had not then been appointed of a multi-part standard.

The plain language standard will be released in 2021 will be Part 1 of a likely multi-part standard. Part 1 will cover high-level matters, so it can be language-neutral. So far, people speaking more than 17 languages – from every continent (except Antarctica) – have reviewed the standard to make sure it will work in their language.

Later parts of the standard will likely focus on particular languages and on particular types of documents and communication.

A standard for “guidance”

Part 1 of the plain language standard will be a standard for “guidance,” which places it in the middle of ISO’s 3 levels of standards. Those levels are:

• At the “bottom” are technical reports, which provide information only.
• In the “middle” are standards for guidance, which use the word “should” to guide users towards what the standard aims to help them achieve.
• At the “top” are mandatory standards, which is probably what most of us think of when we think about a standard. These standards use the word “shall” to direct users on what they must do if they are to comply. (To be sure, that “shall” causes pain to many a plain language practitioner.) In the ISO world, these mandatory “shall” standards are known as being “normative” (see Wikipedia).

An example of a mandatory standard is the one about paper sizes (A2, A3, A4, and so on). Its mandatory nature helps, for example, manufacturers of:

• printers and photocopiers to make machines that will handle the relevant sized paper
• paper to make paper that will fit all the complying machines.

Although the plain language standard may evolve to become a mandatory standard, for now it will be a standard for guidance. Any ISO project to make the plain language standard mandatory would go through the same expert-driven process that the current standard for guidance is going through.

The localization committee

To help ease the way for the pending standard, the Federation has a standard localization committee. The committee, chaired by Gael Spivak of Canada, is seeking to work with plain language practitioners in as many countries as possible to help them engage with their national standards body and localize the standard to their languages and culture.

You can find out who else from your country or language is already involved in this work, and inquire about joining the team, by contacting Gael Spivak directly.

Christopher Balmford

Christopher Balmford is a sea-kayaker, a former lawyer, an entrepreneur, and a plain language advocate and practitioner. He is the convener and project leader of ISO’s TC 37 Working Group 11, which is developing a standard for plain language. Christopher is a past-president of the international plain language organization Clarity. In 1999, he founded the consultancy Words and Beyond, which provides plain language training, cultural change, and document rewriting services. In 2000, he founded the online legal document provider Cleardocs, which Thomson Reuters acquired in 2011.
Localizing the ISO standard

Canadian standard for use in Canada, nor will they publish it as a Canadian standard.
To make it a Canadian standard, it has to go through the Canadian system for that. That system includes having consumer representation on the national standard’s working group and consulting the public about the national standard.

Adopting a standard
ISO lays out the mechanism to adopt standards in the publication ISO/IEC Guide 21. Here is a brief summary of ISO’s process.
When a country adopts a standard, it becomes a standard of that country, and it can do one of the following (using the ISO term for each):
• identical: adopt it as it is
• modified: adopt it with editorial and substantive changes, or localize it to its own country
• not equivalent: adopt a portion of it.
There are requirements for each option. These are some examples of how it can work:
• If a country adopts the standard as identical, it is allowed to make insignificant changes and does not need to identify them.
• If a country modifies the standard, it must identify and explain the changes.
• If a country adopts only a portion of the standard or changes it substantially, it will be considered a different standard, not connected to the ISO one.

Localizing includes translation as well as any changes to suit a country’s culture, languages, or other needs. For example, countries may expand the standard by including best practices to reflect what works within their own language, such as sentence length.

Varying processes by country
In addition, adopting an ISO standard requires that each country go through its own process, as set out by its national standard-setting body.
We have discovered that the process for adopting a standard varies between countries, sometimes by quite a lot. If you want to help your country adopt the ISO standard, you should be aware of some of the differences to help you plan.
For example:
• Some countries have multiple standard-setting bodies.
• Some countries have government standard-setting bodies and some have private standard-setting bodies (or a mix of both).
• Some countries do not allow more than one national group to work on the same topic. So if there is already a technical committee for plain language in your country, the work to adopt the ISO standard may have to be done through that existing committee.
• Some countries allow expert working groups to be created at the national level, as a type of subgroup of their official committee to ISO. If your country allows this, it’s much easier to join that kind of working group.

Endorsing a standard
If a country endorses the plain language standard, they can claim that they endorse an ISO standard. However, some countries do not give the same status to an ISO standard as they do to a national standard.
For example, if Canada does not adopt the standard but only endorses it, Canada can refer to it as an ISO standard (and can say it’s a good standard). But they will not say it’s a standards body. This will help us to promote and increase adoption of the plain language standard around the world.

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Implementing the standard
The Federation’s Localization and Implementation Committee has started its work by identifying people who:
• are interested in helping with this particular aspect of implementing the standard
• are already on the ISO working group that has been drafting the standard
• could work together across countries (same languages or similar regions).
For example, there are Spanish language professionals from several countries who are working together. We will be coordinating and keeping track of who is working on what aspects in each country. We’ve also written a communications plan to help practitioners with messaging and strategies, as they try to convince various groups to localize or adopt the standard.
One of the challenges with working on implementation is that people are not allowed to read the draft standard without being involved in its development. And after it is published, people will be able to access it only by buying it.

Contributing to our work
If you would like to be part of this process, you can help with the implementation and localization work by joining your country’s national standards body. This will help us to promote and increase adoption of the plain language standard around the world.

Gael Spivak works in communications for the Government of Canada, where she specializes in plain language writing and editing. Topics she’s worked on include food safety and food labelling, biotechnology, zoonoses, and road salts. Gael is a past president of the Editors’ Association of Canada and is currently a moderator in the Editors’ Association of Earth community of practice on Facebook. She likes to collect things, including squirrels, tiny books, and articles on the singular they.
Neil James
Chair, Certification Committee
International Plain Language Federation

Certification generally involves independent verification that an item has met a pre-determined standard. Certification of plain language practitioners has been part of the Federation’s agenda since it started. In the 2010 options paper, Sandra Fisher-Martin’s chapter on certification noted:

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Deciding on whether to certify plain language practitioners and how to go about doing it is a long-term project. Sound foundations must be laid before we make any progress: to go about doing it is a long-term project. Sound foundations must be laid before we make any progress:

1. Organizations
2. Individuals
3. Training
4. Documents

To progress this, it decided to set up a Certification Committee, and 22 practitioners put themselves forward. We have representatives from a dozen different countries: Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, South Africa, the UK, and the US.

The Federation asked us to look at the options for certifying all 4 areas and to explore what related professions do. As with the development of the ISO standard, it wanted to consult the wider community every step of the way.

A research paper

The Certification Committee held its first meeting in February 2021. We decided the best way to capture our research and to consult would be to develop a research or options paper. We divided into 4 subcommittees and drafted a paper looking at 4 topics in each area:

1. Focus for certification
2. Issues to resolve
3. Models to consider
4. Next steps

In the first topic, we looked at what could be certified in each area. In areas such as documents and individuals, this was simple enough. But in the case of organizations, should we certify plain language specialists or (potentially) any organization wanting recognition for its plain language activity? And do we certify training for plain language practitioners, and/or training on plain language for non-communication specialists?

Most of the issues we identified are common across all 4 areas. Certification has obvious advantages. For the public, it will help to improve the quality and consistency of communications. For organizations, this will also improve efficiency, reputation, and compliance with external requirements such as plain language laws. For plain language as a discipline, it will raise standards and advance our profession.

But there are challenges we need to resolve. These include the potential costs of certification, the risk of dispute and liability if a certified outcome is not to standard, and the conflicts of interest that can emerge between “doing” and “certifying”.

Next, we have been looking at the available models for certification. In some cases, this has meant exploring the standards or guidelines we might certify against. In other cases, we have focused on the institutional structure for doing the certifying by looking at comparable fields and the systems they are using.

We submitted a summary paper on our initial research to the Federation board in April, which will next be considered by the boards of the Federation’s member organizations.

The certification process

As the diagram shows, a certification system can operate at up to 3 levels:

To start with, you need to establish a standard against which something will be certified. Then you need an individual or organization that can certify that an item meets that standard. In some cases, you also need an accreditation body that can attest that the individuals or organizations doing the certification have the expertise to do so.

The Certification Committee started with the assumption that the soon-to-be-published ISO standard for plain language would set the foundation for certification. However, this is a “guidance” standard rather than a “requirements” standard, and a more restrictive requirements standard must be used for any formal certification system.

In any case, even an ISO requirements standard alone would not be sufficient to certify all areas we are looking at. Certification organizations, for example, calls for quality management systems as much as plain language standards. Training standards would be needed for that area as well as standards on plain language content. And certification of individuals will require standards of practice and assessment systems.

A (very) early framework

With these challenges in mind, we have sketched out a very early framework for a plain language certification, noting that we are yet to define all the standards we would use and who would take on the role at each level – or even whether we would use all levels in all areas (see table below).

We have made some significant progress in just a handful of months, but the process is still at an early stage. The Federation board has asked us to continue the research in all areas while it circulates our initial paper to the boards of its member organizations. Over the next 6 months, we will report again with more detailed models and options to discuss with the wider community.

Dr. Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia. He was the founding Chair of the International Plain Language Federation and a past President of PLAIN. In 2019 he won PLAIN’s Christine Mowat Award. He has published 2 books and over 100 articles and essays on language and literature.

First steps toward certification

An expanded brief

Unlike in 2010, when the discussion of certification focused solely on practitioners, the Federation in 2020 decided to consider certification in 4 areas:

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2. Individuals
3. Training
4. Documents

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A (very) early framework

With these challenges in mind, we have sketched out a very early framework for a plain language certification, noting that we are yet to define all the standards we would use and who would take on the role at each level – or even whether we would use all levels in all areas (see table below).

We have made some significant progress in just a handful of months, but the process is still at an early stage. The Federation board has asked us to continue the research in all areas while it circulates our initial paper to the boards of its member organizations. Over the next 6 months, we will report again with more detailed models and options to discuss with the wider community.

Dr. Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia. He was the founding Chair of the International Plain Language Federation and a past President of PLAIN. In 2019 he won PLAIN’s Christine Mowat Award. He has published 2 books and over 100 articles and essays on language and literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Relevant Standards</th>
<th>Accreditation Bodies</th>
<th>Certification Bodies</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Underlying guidance | ISO | Guidance standard |

The certification process

As the diagram shows, a certification system can operate at up to 3 levels:

To start with, you need to establish a standard against which something will be certified. Then you need an individual or organization that can certify that an item meets that standard. In some cases, you also need an accreditation body that can attest that the individuals or organizations doing the certification have the expertise to do so.

The Certification Committee started with the assumption that the soon-to-be-published ISO standard for plain language would set the foundation for certification. However, this is a “guidance” standard rather than a “requirements” standard, and a more restrictive requirements standard must be used for any formal certification system.

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Plain language training

At the end of 2020, the International Plain Language Federation set up a committee to explore what role it might play in further professionalizing plain language training after the ISO Standard is published. By late January 2021, we zeroed in on 3 training-related projects:

- high-level guidelines for plain language training and education
- a resource bank for plain language professionals, featuring research and practical materials for training and coaching
- online train-the-trainer modules to aid plain language trainers.

We divided into 3 subcommittees, with each exploring one project. By late April, we presented the results to the Federation board, which essentially told the committee to “keep going!”

Over the next 6 months, the Training Committee will focus on the high-level training guidelines and a resource bank, since these 2 projects would provide content for any train-the-trainer modules. Following is some further detail about these 2 projects.

Training guidelines

Similar to the way the ISO standard offers guidelines for plain language documents, any training guidelines might recommend ways to approach plain language training.

A resource bank

A 2020 survey of PLAIN members asked “Which of the following resources would you find the most valuable?” Some 73% of the participants chose “online library of standards/best practice.”

A resource bank would meet this need, making available everything from sound research to practical materials for training and coaching. The big challenges will be in creating a broad set of criteria and in finding a platform that would satisfy them.

So far, the subcommittee has been exploring web-based options, including subscription-style approaches that would be self-funding and close to self-running. While Federation member organizations, other institutions, and many plain language practitioners already offer resources from the Federation’s member organizations may remain available only to that organization’s members.

Who might use such a resource bank? For starters:

- plain language trainers looking for new evidence to support their work
- experts in health, law, engineering, and finance looking for ways to communicate technical content in plain language
- managers who want to support their teams or spark staff development
- participants in plain language training courses
- anyone else interested in clear communication

Think of how much you would have wanted proven materials when you were new to plain language.

What’s more, a resource bank could foster an active community of practice, with plain language practitioners around the world contributing knowledge, sharing ideas, and supporting each other. It could also provide support material for the ISO standard.

Next steps for this subcommittee include:

- conducting a short survey among all 3 member organizations to ensure members support the idea (potentially including a modest subscription fee dedicated to funding the resource bank to make it sustainable)
- developing a business model
- exploring ways to mobilize administrative time for moderation and review, such as a self-regulating rating system (1-5 stars or a thumbs-up/down feature)
- exploring funding, including sponsorships and direct financial contribution
- identifying a volunteer content strategist or developer to confirm that a resource bank with the features we might need is feasible.

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How you can help

We are looking for anyone in the plain language community with experience as a web content developer who might be interested in working on the resource bank project. Simply contact me, David Lipscomb, to let us know.

We would also love to hear feedback, ideas, and suggestions. Look out for more updates in about 6 months, when we next report to the Federation board.

David Lipscomb
Chair, Training Committee
International Plain Language Federation

David Lipscomb is Vice Chair of the Center for Plain Language and a member of the drafting committee for the ISO Plain Language Standard. As a day job, he directs the Writing Center at Georgetown University, where he is Associate Teaching Professor of English. Earlier in his career, David ran a small consulting firm that conducted training and coaching for Kellogg, Viacom, the American Red Cross, and dozens of other organizations.

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The international definition of plain language

plain language. This article briefly outlines how we arrived at this definition, what we’ve done since then, and where we go from here.

Beginnings
The path to an internationally accepted definition was neither easy nor straightforward. The work was started by the (then) International Plain Language Working Group that Neil James proposed at the 2007 PLAIN conference in Amsterdam. We held our first meeting at the Clarity conference in Mexico City the following year.

The group was formed with representatives from the Plain Language Association International, The Center for Plain Language, and Clarity to professionalize plain language in ways best achieved by working together.

In 2009, the working group released a series of options papers at the Sydney PLAIN conference, one of which set out the existing definitions of plain language and proposed that we establish a standard international approach. Up to that point, varying definitions were used and they were of variable quality.

This called for extensive consultation with the plain language community over subsequent conferences. In 2010, the working group published a more developed version of the options papers in the Clarity Journal, Issue 64. We identified an international definition as our top priority task.

The International Plain Language Working Group renamed itself the International Plain Language Federation at the Stockholm conference in 2011, where there was also extensive debate on the right wording for the definition.

We continued to refine the definition in conferences at Washington (2012) and Vancouver (2013) and through an email discussion list. As we narrowed the drafts (and there were 17 of them) the group also narrowed until we were left with Annetta Cheek, Joe Kimble, Christopher Balmford, Martin Cutts and Neil James. The Federation Board endorsed the definition in 2014 and the 3 member organizations adopted it in the following year.

These translations are not meant to be literal, but rather to capture the essence of the definition. If you can provide a translation in another language, please email Federation Chair Vera Gergely.

Issues
A couple of issues have come up repeatedly throughout the history of the definition. The one that generated the most discussion is whether to use the term “reader” or “audience.” The 2010 options paper used “audience,” but the definition endorsed in 2014 used “reader.”

More recently, some people have advocated for “users;” to signify that plain language is not just for documents that are read. Some commenters suggest that “reader” is becoming too limiting and out of date, and that we will need to broaden it.

During the final push to adopt the definition, the drafting group also debated the adverb “easily” ad nauseum. For a short time, “readily” was in the running, but that quickly lost out. However, not all drafters believed that either word should be there. “Easily” won because a majority agreed that it would close a potential loophole. The qualifier requires that the reader can comprehend a document without excess effort.

International standard
The 2010 options papers included international standards as the implied second priority after the definition. The Federation started its standards project in 2019. We decided to work with ISO, the international standardization body, to develop that standard.

Through the efforts of Christopher Balmford, Standards Australia (the Australian national standards body) proposed the project and ISO agreed. By 2021, the ISO working group produced a draft standard, which is now in its final stages of development.

The plain language standard is largely based on the international definition. It’s a procedural document that outlines processes that organizations need to follow to ensure their communications conform to the definition.

ISO is an immensely influential international body. Once the standard is adopted, it and the definition on which it is based should become accepted very widely in the public and private sectors of many countries.

The future
I’m occasionally asked whether there’s any intent to revise the definition. Actually, when it was first adopted, there was an intent to review the definition in 5 years to see if it should be revised.

While developing the ISO standard, there was considerable discussion about possible revisions. Most people on the ISO working group – which included many with communication interests other than plain language – felt that the current definition was a good one. But there were some suggestions that the Federation may want to think about in the future.

One suggestion has been to change the structure to clear up any confusion about whether “easily” applies only to “find,” or also to “understand” and “use.” The original intent was that it applied to all 3 verbs, but the current version does not make that clear enough. We might also want to revisit the wording alternatives of “reader,” “audience,” or “user.”

Finally, it’s likely that as the ISO standard spreads to different countries that are not all English-speaking, we may learn lessons about applying the definition in other languages that will suggest changes in the original English version.

Translations
With agreed wording in English, our next task was to translate it. So far, we have collected translations of the definition in 24 languages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Afrikaans</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalan</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese (Cantonese)</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Irish Gaelic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Norwegian</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The neuroscience behind writing for fluency

Drawing from neuroscience
But how exactly can a writer make the text easy to read? Fortunately, research in neuroscience has been mapping the reading processes we need to understand. Scientists follow activity in the brain by measuring chemical and electrical activity as the brain receives, encodes, and moves information. The field of neuroscience extends to neurobiology, neurolinguistics, and neurocognitive psychology. These can all help us develop best practices for reading efficiency.

A research agenda for plain language could start with a literature review in each area. I have created some brain-focused writing guidelines from my own review. Following are the key steps in the reading process that I drew from the literature.

Competing for attention
We’ve heard a lot about information overload. The first challenge it presents is how to draw your desired reader’s attention to your material. Then you need to use techniques that gain their focused attention. Without that, your beautiful language will never be read.

The form of the communication also needs to meet reader expectations for the genre. Readers prepare themselves for processing different kinds of information according to what they expect of it. Writers or editors can then help to orient readers by previewing the topic and outlining a structure the reader can use to frame and hold detail. We naturally categorize to make sense of things by creating a schema, shape, or plan. A schema helps to keep the reader focused and frame the information they require and the information they material on a balance of the effort needed, the less effort needed, the more likely they are to consider the gain. The less effort needed, the required and the information they read.

To comprehend text, the reader must:
- sound out the phonemes in a word, connect the sound with vision of the word by sight
- search for the word in long-term memory
- link the word with possible meanings by recalling prior encounters with it
- hold words and possible meanings in working memory
- use knowledge of sentence structures and punctuation to deconstruct the sentence
- identify a word’s function by its location in the sentence
- process all the above to understand the sentence’s meaning
- go back to an earlier stage if there is dissonance at any point or if there is no congruence.

As with other brain activity, the brain searches for similar patterns in its storage system. This is the Type 1 thinking system that Daniel Kahneman reported. As thinkers, we strive for consistency, and the lack of it prompts psychological stressors, such as anxiety and frustration.

When comprehension succeeds, information is connected to the existing network of related or similar information in our long-term memory storage. Only the differences are saved between the word’s current use and prior encounters. New information must be assimilated or altered so it will connect. Or new connections or frameworks have to be created.

Drawing from neuroscience
We can then make reading easier and information more available for recall by using techniques such as choosing the right words and using the default structure of sentences.

Comprehending the words
A focus on these language and thinking functions of the brain help to make textual decisions that facilitate reading. This does not replace user testing, but it can save a lot of time. It also gives us the evidence we need to persuade some language traditionalists to accept change.

To comprehend text, the reader then has to produce engaging content that tells the reader how this information relates to their life. This will motivate the reader to focus, which is essential before reading begins.

Measuring reading ease
Understanding the processes involved in reading can also help us to quantify reading ease by measuring the:

1. speed of processing text, and the delays caused by certain features of language and design
2. effort and energy required to process, understand, and encode the information
3. ease or difficulty in recalling the information to complete a task or use it

We infer that the more fluent the reading processes a piece, the more likely it is to be read. The more fluent the reading processes a piece, the more likely it is to be read. If you can use techniques such as choosing the right words and using the default structure of sentences, you can make reading easier and information more available for recall by using those techniques.

Deciphering the meaning of the words is inextricably linked with discovering the syntax of the sentence to confirm the word meaning. Together, these disclose the semantics – the meaning.

Making inferences
Next comes inference, which includes anticipating what comes next, connecting the dots, and following the narrative. When the writer makes logical implications, the reader must infer the connections and details. Not all readers can make the necessary links.

Inference works like auto-correct or predictive text – it can be wrong and require the reader to back track their developing understanding. Inferences are drawn from the context, document structure, page layout, and design elements.

Inferencing the writer’s meaning is a crucial cognitive skill readers and a marker of the reader’s literacy skills. This is shown in the following chart for assessing adult reading competencies from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

(continued on next page)
Inferences are demanded of the reader when they must hold information in working memory while seeking information that is physically separated. On another level, the process of inferring parallels the brain’s natural practice of anticipating and predicting what comes next. This and problem-solving takes place within the capacity of the working memory, which is short.

**Developing best practices**

By combining this scientific evidence, we can draw out guidelines for presenting information in ways that address the anticipated reader’s literacy skills, as the table below summarises. Note that even geniuses (4% of the population) still prefer clear, simple, structured information – because all brains like it that way.

Thirty years ago, Edward Fry offered us writeability guidelines he developed from studying and consulting on readability. We now have similar results from studying what happens inside our heads as we read and think. If you follow the guidelines that I have developed for readable writing, you’ll save yourself time and make life easier for your readers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three communication styles for different reading competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Low literacy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visual graphics with word labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Very short, simple sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Average literacy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Common words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Default sentence structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clear and simple layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Skilled readers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clear language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Industry-specific terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Familiar organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Good layout and structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cheryl Stephens has been a leader in the plain language movement since she co-founded Plain Language Association International in 1993. PLAIN has honoured Cheryl with its Founders Award, life membership, and by naming its biennial innovation award after her. In 2019, Cheryl founded the association PLAIN Canada CLAIR. Cheryl Stephens researches, writes, and teaches plain language. Her works include Plain Language Legal Writing, Plain Language In Plain English, and 2 other books about plain language through Plain Language Wizardry. She received her BA from the University of the Pacific and a law degree from the University of British Columbia. She studied communications at Simon Fraser University and manages a LinkedIn group called Plain Language: Research. Reading about neuroscience is her latest hobby.
Crystal-clear insurance contracts: Mission possible

1. Consider Italian insurance contracts today
In February 2018 the Italian Authority for Insurances (IVASS), in cooperation with the Italian Association of Insurance Companies (ANIA), published a guideline for all companies entitled “Contratti semplici e chiari”; it’s a short, nine-page PDF with few indications about how to make contracts clearer, especially in their general structure. There is only a short section about wording, phrases, and style. Since then, IVASS checks each year on how companies have improved their contracts. Results are quite different: some of them have tried (or are trying) to make their language clearer, while other companies still use rare and specialized words, long sentences, and passive voice.

At the same time, we must consider what ANIA itself states: Italian insurance markets for damages has one of the lowest rates in Europe in relation to gross domestic product (GDP).

The question therefore is: are these two facts connected? And what about the fact that where contracts are clearer (such as in United States or United Kingdom), the insurance rate is higher? So, can we assume that the clearer the contracts, the higher the insurance rates in relation to GDP are?

2. Define “plain Italian” as level B1
First of all: why B1? Let’s consider the reading level of 15-year-old Italian students. According to OCSE-PIA results, only 5% of students can understand complex texts, which is classified as ranging from level B2 up to C2.

Secondly, as stated by the Italian national statistics institute (ISTAT), in the population between ages 25 and 64, only 61.7% has attended at least 12 years of school, compared to 78.1% of the European Union. If insurance companies want their contracts understood, they therefore need to write at the B1 level. Contracts are the first step, but this should include all documents and communications as well. This is also the goal that IVASS wants to achieve: what they ask of insurance companies is to use a plain Italian – a B1 level Italian.

Thirdly, according to Istituto Treccani, the so-called “lessico fondamentale” (basic vocabulary) of the Italian language consists of an average of 2,000 words, out of the 427,000 words of the whole language. And the average Italian uses those 2,000 words to make more than 93% of their daily communication. This is therefore the situation we must be aware of.

3. Reflect on plain Italian and legal issues
Of course, “plain Italian” is also a matter of wording. Let’s give a simple example. In every contract you can find the phrase “conclusione del contratto”. A B1-level speaker would understand “when the contract ends” or “when the contract stops”. But in legal Italian, that sentence means “when the processing phase ends”; or in other words, “when the contract comes into effect”. Exactly the opposite. So, why can we use a clearer phrase? Other words or sentences like this are common in contracts, with the result of leaving people in doubt about the real meaning of what they read. But the Italian language has a wider problem, which comes from its linguistic history. The very first origin of Italian was recorded in 13th-14th century, when some great poets in Tuscany began using their own dialect instead of Latin. In 16th century, the characteristics of this “Tuscan” were established as a literary and court language, while common people went on using the different dialects spread throughout Italy. Since then, what we call “Italian” today was used exclusively by clerics, poets, and intellectuals. Although the process of a real linguistic unification started with the reunification of Italy in 1866, it wasn’t until the mid-20th century that the common language took hold.

So we can say that modern Italian is a “written-born” language, not a “speaking-born” one. The result is that Italian is in general a more conservative language and the difference between the written and oral language is wider than in other countries. And as you can imagine, the gap is even greater between legal written Italian and spoken Italian.

4. Encourage plain Italian within insurance companies: Our mission
Insurance contracts are probably the most common example of legal language. Besides, the need of insurance protection is more and more relevant, with special regard to the so-called “LTC”, or long-term care policies. The population is getting older and older and public welfare is not enough. People need policies, but clear policies. So we at Palestra della scrittura have to deal with different issues:

a) Challenge resistance from lawyers. They barely tolerate general the use of plain language, as they consider such a choice as a danger to their authority. The more complex they write, the higher – in their estimation – is their reputation.

b) Develop language skills as fundamental training for all people involved in the insurance system.

Because the journal is a membership benefit, we ask you to follow some guidelines for sharing and promoting it. This will allow us to protect the value of our membership and continue to produce this resource for all members.

Please do:

• Share a link to our website where we promote the journal.
• Encourage others to join PLAIN so that they can also read the journal.
• Share a printed copy only with your colleagues who might be interested.

Please do not:

• Circulate digital copies.
• Post images of articles that are not written by you.

Lorenzo Carpanè
Palestra della scrittura

The Italian insurance market is facing a new challenge: to simplify the language of contracts. Palestra della scrittura, our company that focuses on research and training, is a partner with some of the most important Italian insurance companies. In order to do this, we have to deal with the following issues:

1. consider Italian insurance contracts today – how companies write them currently and what indications come from Italian authorities
2. define “plain Italian” as level B1
3. reflect on plain Italian and legal issues
4. encourage plain Italian within insurance companies: our mission.

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b) Develop language skills as fundamental training for all people involved in the insurance system.

c) Help companies find acceptable solutions for the challenges that the complexity of the Italian legal language presents.

d) Push for a wider movement for the development of plain Italian, using all strategies we can afford, including support from Plain Language Association International.

All of these connect to our final goal: to help people become conscious citizens who know their rights and duties. It means increasing trust in institutions in general, publicadd comma and private. If we do not pursue this goal, the risk we run is to enforce the divide we now see between citizens and institutions, now, as confirmed by ISTAT, at a very high level. What will this mean for our society? And what for the new generations?

Lorenzo Carpanè

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Contratti assicurativi chiari e semplici: Missione possibile

1. Analizzare i contratti assicurativi italiani odierni

Nel febbraio 2018 l'Autorità italiana per le assicurazioni (IVASS), in cooperazione con l'Associazione delle Compagnie Assicurative (ANIA), ha pubblicato delle linee guida per tutte le compagnie, intitolate Contratti semplici e chiari. È un breve pdf di nove pagine con poche indicazioni su come realizzare contratti più chiari, specialmente per ciò che riguarda la struttura generale. Solo poche parole sul lessico, sintassi e stile. Da allora IVASS verifica come le compagnie migliorano i loro contratti. I risultati sono molto diversi: alcune di esse hanno tentato (o stanno tentando) di rendere più chiaro il linguaggio, mentre altre compagnie usano ancora parole rare e specialistiche, frasi lunghe e forme passive. Allo stesso tempo, dobbiamo considerare ciò che la stessa ANIA certifica: il mercato italiano delle assicurazioni dà un'ulteriore percentuale in Europa in relazione al prodotto interno lordo (PIL).

La domanda dunque è: questi due fatti sono connessi? E cosa dire del fatto che dove i contratti sono più chiari, (come negli Stati Uniti o nel Regno Unito), la percentuale di assicurazione è più alta? Pertanto, possiamo dedurre che più chiari sono i contratti, più alta è la percentuale di assicurazione in rapporto al PIL?

2. Definire il “plain Italian” come livello B1

Prima di tutto: perché B1? Consideriamo il livello di capacità di lettura degli studenti italiani di 15 anni, secondo le rilevazioni to OCSE-PISA. Essi provano che solo il 5% degli studenti più comprensere testi complessi, tra i livelli B2 e C2. In secondo luogo, come testimoniato dall'Istituto Italiano di Statistica (ISTAT), nella popolazione con età compresa tra i 25 e 64 anni, solo il 67,7% ha frequentato almeno dodici anni di scuola, in rapporto al 78,1% dell’Unione Europea.

Se le assicurazioni vogliono che i loro contratti siano compresi, esse hanno bisogno di scrivere il più possibile con un linguaggio B1: i contratti sono il primo passo, ma così deve avvenire anche per tutti i documenti e tutte le comunicazioni. Questo è l’obiettivo che anche IVASS vuole raggiungere: ciò che essa chiede è che le compagnie usino un “plain Italian”, un italiano B1.

In terzo luogo, secondo l’Istituto Trecarni, il cosiddetto “lessico fondamentale” della lingua italiana consiste di circa 2000 parole, sulle 427.000 che compongono la lingua italiana. E con quelle 2000 parole un cittadino comune fa più del 93% di tutte le sue frasi. Questo è dunque il quadro che noi dobbiamo considerare.

3. Riflettere sul “plain Italian” e sulle sfide legali

Come abbiamo osservato nel precedente paragrafo, il “plain Italian” è naturalmente anche una questione di lessico. In ogni contratto si trova per esempio la seguente espressione: “conclusione del contratto”. Una persona di livello linguistico B1 capirebbe “quando il contratto finisce”, ma nell’italiano “legale” quell’espressione significa “quando finisce il processo di realizzazione del contratto”; cioè “quando il contratto ha effetto”. Esattamente l’opposto. Dunque perché non usare un’altra tra le varie espressioni che la lingua italiana permette?

Nei contratti si possono trovare altre espressioni come questa, con il risultato di lasciare le persone in dubbio sul reale significato di ciò che leggono. Ma l’italiano ha un problema ancora più grande, che gli deriva dalla sua storia. L’origine della lingua italiana può essere fatta risalire al 13° e 14° secolo, quando in Toscana alcuni grandi scrittori iniziarono a usare il loro volgare al posto del latino. Nel 16° secolo poi le caratteristiche di questo toscano vennero fissate come linguaggio letterario e di corte, mentre la gente comune continuava a usare i differenti dialetti diffusi in tutta la penisola.

Da allora quello che noi chiamiamo “Italiano” fu usato da chierici, poeti, intellettuali. Fino alla unificazione italiana nel 1866, in primo luogo; ma il processo di una reale unificazione linguistica ebbe inizio nel 1926; con età comprese tra i 25 e 64 anni, solo il 67,7% ha frequentato almeno dodici anni di scuola, in rapporto al 78,1% dell’Unione Europea.

4. Incoraggiare il “plain Italian” nella compagnia assicurativa

I contratti assicurativi sono probabilmente l’esempio più diffuso di linguaggio legale. Inoltre, il bisogno di protezione assicurativa è sempre più importante, con una speciale attenzione per le cosiddette “LTC” (Long term care), le assicurazioni che si occupano della salute nel futuro. Noi stiamo diventando sempre più anziani e il sistema pubblico non può fare abbastanza. Noi abbiamo bisogno di polizze assicurative, di polizze assicurative chiare. Così noi, come Palestre della scrittura, abbiamo deciso di considerare una serie di questioni:

a) affrontare e superare le resistenze che vengono dai legali: essi fanno fatica ad accettare in generale l’uso di un linguaggio semplice, perché pensano che questa scelta sia un pericolo per il loro ruolo. Più complicato scrivono, più alta, pensano, è la loro reputazione.

b) sviluppare le competenze di tutte le persone coinvolte nel sistema assicurativo

c) aiutare le compagnie a trovare soluzioni accettabili per le sfide che la complessità del linguaggio legale pone loro
Plain language in Russia

- 95% of respondents had not read contracts and other documents before signing.
- Only 40% of Russians read a loan agreement before signing it, and people with low financial literacy take out the most expensive loans.
- More than 70% of Russians are not getting vaccinated against COVID-19, and about 30% are against vaccination in general. Experts admit the reason is failed communications on the subject.

Thus, plain Russian is needed everywhere since comprehensibility of texts plays a crucial role in healthcare, banking, legal, and other everyday life matters. Business, especially one providing professional services or selling complex products, should also be more efficient in communications to ensure the target audience is really able to understand what is offered.

Policy documents

Many government agencies in the Russian Federation (educational, social, healthcare, etc.) use various sets of guidelines and instructions on creating an accessible environment, which state explicitly that translation of texts into plain language (terms to denote plain language in Russia are dostupny, poryazny, prosto yazyk) is a necessary tool for removing barriers in providing information to the general public. In April 2020, the national standard GOSTR 52872-2019 came into force. It contains requirements on making information provided to the general public in electronic and digital form accessible. The standard recommends ensuring that content is comprehensible, based on the “level of basic general education” (9 grades of secondary school). In cases where understanding the text requires a higher level of education, according to the GOSTR, additional explanatory content or a text version accessible to the general public must be provided. Clearly an understanding of the need in plain language does exist in the country. However, there are no generally accepted standards for plain writing, nor common view on principles and rules of plain Russian.

Practice: State-level initiatives

In terms of practical realization of the plain Russian ideology, the situation is more optimistic. Efforts are made at both the state and private levels.

As part of the effort to improve financial literacy of Russians, the Bank of Russia launched the resource fincult.info. This website covers most common everyday situations, demanding knowledge in finance and economics. The structure and wording could be improved, but the existence of such initiative is promising by itself. Another interesting initiative in the finance sector is publishing the guidelines by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation named “How to write reports in plain language.” The document can hardly be considered a universal manual on plain Russian, but it has much in common with other guidelines in terms of the idea and tendency to use simple wording.

The COVID-19 outbreak stimulated developments in making healthcare information more comprehensible. Since it became extremely important that people correctly understand the authorities’ recommendations and restrictions, the Ministry of Health - the primary source of reliable information - made much effort to become more accessible and comprehensible for the general public. The texts on the website are written in fairly simple language and the illustrations used are helpful. However, the most notable changes in everyday communications occur due to efforts of few enthusiasts and effective communications advocates.

Practice: Private initiatives

The most renowned of them is Maxim Ilyakhov — a Russian author, designer, and editor. The creator and promoter of so-called Information Style or Infostyle (Infomationny Stil), Maxim published several books and delivered training on effective and clear writing. They include key principles of Infostyle, which have much in common with principles of plain language, such as a focus on the reader’s needs and interest, clear structure, examples and visualization, non-use of abstract, and complex wording. The target audience of the books and author’s other activities are commercial writers and everyone who writes text for work and business.

Maxim also produced some notable and widely used projects as an editor. For example, the cases of the State services portal. Development of the site is an attempt of the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) to improve the readability of official information. A project team was created for Gornougi.ru, a multipurpose editorial policy, which includes guides on how to name services, how to write news, how to answer letters and social media requests, for example. The result is something that could be regarded as plain Russian.

Another popular project set up by Ilyakhov is a digital journal about money by Tinkoff Bank. The project covers hundreds of topics and is aimed at raising financial literacy and culture at the bank’s clients and others interested in the topic.

An important initiative was taken by Ivan Bognin, CLARITY member and director of a non-profit organization Information Culture. He has created an open-access resource plainrussian.ru, which is a tool for measuring text readability and complexity. The result is given both as a numeric value and the needed level of education and age (e.g. readability index 14.03; level of education: from 1st to 3rd years at university; approximate age: 17 to 19).

Practice: Project by the Association of Translation Teachers

In 2018, the Association of Translation Teachers created an international research and practice project named “Translation into Easy and Plain Languages in Russia.” The project was aimed at consolidating and methodizing expertise, processes, and procedures of writing in and translating into Easy and plain Russian.

The project team includes both association members and external participants, including experts like Dr. Prof. Andreas Baumert (member at the DIN Plain Language Standard working group and lead of the DIN Standard for Plain Language working group).

The team is developing and refining conceptual framework for plain Russian, publishing scholarly articles and presenting at thematic conventions. On October 13, 2020, International Plain Language Day, the ATT project group organized the first International Round Table entitled “Translation into Plain Language: Foreign Experience and Prospects in Russia.” The discussion at the round table gave a new impetus to the further development of the project.

The project has already shown that both government and non-government organizations understand that plain language is essential. At the moment, the project group is building an expert group to localize ISO 24495 Standard (Plain Language: Governing principles and guidelines) in Russia, developing educational programs, and preparing a textbook on the simple Russian language to be published. We hope that these initiatives and other efforts of the association to popularize plain language will bear fruit in the near future, so that government and commercial organizations in Russia will start communicating plainly.

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Так, опрос 1819 человек из 39 регионов безграмотности населения и порождает сложности юридических, финансовых, к упрощению письменной речи, уровень просто предпочитают их не читать. В то стандартном языке тексты. Либо они помощь, чтобы понять написанные на читательской грамотности в Российской и Эмма против вакцинации в принципе. COVID-19, а около 30% — выступают не собираются делать прививку от грамотностью. Более 70% россиян берут люди с низкой финансовой в плане. Только 40% россиян подписанием. Только 40% россиян понимание образования» (девять классов средней в случаях, когда понимание образовательных, социальных, медицинских и т. д. существуют (образовательных, социальных, медицинских и т. д.) с экономики. Структура текстов требующие знаний в области знаний и понятным языком, избегая сложных тексты требует более высокого уровня образования, согласно ГОСТР, при их подписанном, а самые дорогие дороге берут люди с низкой финансовой грамотностью. Более 70% россиян не собираются делать прививку от COVID-19, а около 30% — выступают против вакцинации в принципе. Эксперты признают, что причина в разделившей коммуникации, антивирусы публикуют гораздо больше доступных и понятных материалов, чем отпечатанные за здоровые граждан кого-то. Мы убеждены, что простой русский язык (Plain Russian) необходим в стране на всех уровнях, так как понятность текстов играет решающую роль в здравоохранении, банковском деле, юриспруденции и других вопросах повседневной жизни. Бизнес, особенно предоставляющий профессиональные услуги или продавая сложные продукты, также должен задуматься об эффективности своих коммуникаций, если хочется быть услышанным своей аудиторией.

Простой язык в нормативных документах
Во многих государственных учреждениях Российской Федерации (образовательных, социальных, медицинских и т. д.) существуют руководства и регламенты по созданию доступных текстов, в которых в том числе приводится, что перевод текстов на простой языке (термин) — необходимый инструмент для устранения барьеров в предоставлении услуг всем группам населения. В апреле 2020 года вступил в силу национальный стандарт ГОСТ Р 52872-2019 Он содержит требования по обеспечению доступности информации, предоставляемой в электронной и цифровой форме. Стандарт рекомендует обеспечить понятность содержания, исходя из уровня основного общего образования (девять классов средней школы). В случаях, когда понимание текста требует более высокого уровня образования, согласно ГОСТР, при их подписанном, а самые дорогие дороге берут люди с низкой финансовой грамотностью. Более 70% россиян не собираются делать прививку от COVID-19, а около 30% — выступают против вакцинации в принципе. Эксперты признают, что причина в разделившей коммуникации, антивирусы публикуют гораздо больше доступных и понятных материалов, чем отпечатанные за здоровые граждан кого-то. Мы убеждены, что простой русский язык (Plain Russian) необходим в стране на всех уровнях, так как понятность текстов играет решающую роль в здравоохранении, банковском деле, юриспруденции и других вопросах повседневной жизни. Бизнес, особенно предоставляющий профессиональные услуги или продавая сложные продукты, также должен задуматься об эффективности своих коммуникаций, если хочется быть услышанным своей аудиторией.
Plain language has few chances without standards

Experts must impart knowledge in everyday language

If the ISO/DIN Plain Language were already in place, two rules would be of central importance:
1. Set the audience for which the text is intended.
2. The text is limited to the vocabulary of the target group.

The legislation with the Corona Code of Conduct, which deeply affects people’s everyday lives, is not formulated for the population. The rules are written by lawyers for lawyers. Technical terms from virology and pandemic research are adopted without question. Scientific literature is mostly in English and German translations are rarely specified for specific terms.

Politics, administration, and science expect the media to translate this technical language. But local and regional media in particular are completely overwhelmed by this. Everyone assumes that ordinary citizens understand what “lockdown” actually means. Social distancing, home-office, home-schooling, or FFP mask have become equally common in the German language. But why?

I bring difficult texts towards the goal of plain language. The emphasis is on “towards”; I usually only reach plain language because the source texts have failed to serve their purpose. They are not limited to the vocabulary of the target group. I cannot repeat it often enough: a text is addressed to the target group.

My conclusion: the author must embrace plain language. This is the first step for making a text ready for the general public. There should be as little technical language as possible. This will allow the editing process into plain language easier. Covid-19 communication has shown how far politics, administration, and science are from this realization. I can only hope that a national standard will bring more acceptance.

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Einfache Sprache hat ohne Standards wenig Chancen

Uwe Roth
Journalist


Die Deutschen lieben ihre langen Sätze

