

Plain language fact sheet



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Introduction

At Scope, we're often asked whether a document should be written in plain language, Easy English or both. This fact sheet provides an overview of plain language, writing style considerations and top tips.

What is plain language?

Plain language involves writing clearly so readers can find, understand and use the information they need from one reading. The Plain English Foundation describes the key features as a combination of "clear, concise expression; an effective structure and good document design."

Who is plain language for?

Plain language is about writing for a specific audience, for example, consumers, students or work colleagues. The key is to know your audience and their needs. You should write separate documents for different audiences - even if you are writing about the same topic.

Why is plain language important?

Many people, including those with good literacy skills, find it hard to read and understand everyday written information. For example, forms, reports, legal documents and instructions. Plain language helps people to find, understand and make informed choices about things that are important to them.

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Did you know that 44% of Australian adults have difficulty reading and writing?

In 2013, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a survey of adult literacy across 24 countries. The results showed that out of six literacy levels, approximately 7.3 million Australians had literacy skills at Level 2 or below.*

At level 2, participants were asked to match text and information using a variety of digital and printed materials – for example, summarise text or draw conclusions.

* Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) 4228.0 - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-12. Retrieved 14/11/13

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4228.0>



●	Below level 1 literacy	3.7 per cent
●	Level 1 literacy	10 per cent
●	Level 2 literacy	30 per cent
●	Level 3 literacy	38 per cent
●	Level 4 literacy	14 per cent
●	Level 5 literacy	1.2 per cent

Plain language and Easy English - common principles

Plain language and Easy English are both forms of accessible written information that help readers to find, understand and use the information they need from one reading.

Similarities include the use of:

- basic language and grammar
- simplified font
- white space
- key headings
- bullet lists.

Plain language and Easy English - how do they differ?

Plain language and Easy English documents look quite different. Easy English documents have less text, more white space and images that help readers understand the information. For more information, read our Easy English fact sheet.

Easy English is produced for people with low English literacy so the documents have different language, grammar and design styles.

For example, the following styles are **not** used in Easy English but commonly used in plain language documents:

- abbreviations such as 'e.g.' and contractions such as 'don't'
- colons to introduce bullet lists
- punctuation such as brackets, semi-colons and quote marks
- stand-alone pronouns such as 'this', 'that' and 'it'
- transition words such as 'also', 'therefore' and 'but'
- longer versions of words, such as 'reading' instead of 'read', 'quickly' instead of 'quick'
- common expressions to create a conversational tone such as 'the devil is in the detail'
- words for numbers zero to nine and numerals from 10 onwards
- tables, graphs, photos and other design features
- italics for emphasis, titles of works or legislation.

Consider your audience

Before you start, make sure you know your audience. If your audience has low English literacy, write an Easy English document. If your audience has good English literacy and can understand the topic, write a plain language document.

Many organisations use both plain language and Easy English communications. For example, an annual report might be translated into plain language, along with an Easy English translation of the executive summary.

You might also consider translating your plain language documents into other languages to help people with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds understand the information.

Plain language top tips

The following tips will help you to develop effective plain language documents.

1. Plan and structure your document

- Know and write for your audience.
- Start by explaining the purpose of the document and how it's organised.
- Organise your information in a logical sequence.
- Use headings and subheadings that stand out from the text.
- Ensure the most important information is at the beginning of the document and each section.

2. Simplify your writing style

- Use a positive, conversational tone.
- Use direct language such as 'you' and 'we'.
- Use active, rather than passive, sentences.
- Include only key information.
- Focus on one idea per sentence.
- Use short words.
- Write short sentences, paragraphs and sections.
- Use everyday language.
- Use inclusive language.
- Define technical terms and acronyms - or leave them out.
- Write in the present tense where possible.

3. Think about your design

- Break up text with bullet lists.
- Use white space where possible.
- Use a size 12 font.
- Use margins that are at least one inch wide and left justified.
- Ensure the text colour contrasts with the background.

References

- 'Federal Plain Language Guidelines', March 2011, Rev. 1, May 2011
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- 'A Plain Language Audit Tool', North West Territories Literacy Council
- 'Scope Clear Written Communications, The Easy English Style Guide', 2015