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 Easy English and tips for planning an Easy English project.

What is Easy English?

Easy English is a style of writing that is clear and easy to understand. It also includes images that add meaning to text where required.

Easy English is sometimes called Easy Read, Easy to Read or Accessible Written Information.

Who is Easy English for?

Many people find it hard to read and understand everyday written information, such as letters, application forms and instructions.

Easy English helps people with low English literacy to access information they need. A person may have low English literacy due to:

• intellectual or cognitive disability
• a learning disability
• acquired disability, such as stroke, brain injury or degenerative condition
• poor educational outcomes
• reduced exposure to literacy in adult life
• culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
• mental or acute illness
• ageing.

Easy English should ideally be read with help from a support person, such as a family member, friend or carer. The support person can use the images to explain key messages, find more information and help the reader make informed decisions if required.
Assisting the reader

When assisting the reader:

• familiarise yourself with the Easy English document and supporting information
• choose a quiet and comfortable environment
• be flexible – the person might want you to read or they might want to read some sections
• encourage discussion and provide relevant examples
• take your time and wait for answers to questions
• note any concerns or anything you can’t answer for follow-up
• be clear about who will send additional information to the person and when.

Why is Easy English important?

Everyone has the right to understand written information to participate fully in society. Easy English was developed to make this process easier for people with low English literacy.

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.


Below level 1 literacy 3.7 per cent
Level 1 literacy 10 per cent
Level 2 literacy 30 percent
Level 3 literacy 38 per cent
Level 4 literacy 14 per cent
Level 5 literacy 1.2 per cent
What are the key features of Easy English?

Easy English communications feature accessible:
- language
- layout
- design
- colours
- images.

The key features of Easy English are:
- images to explain key messages
- basic language and grammar
- minimal punctuation
- simplified font, layout and design
- use of white space
- bullet points to break up text.

More information

Scope’s publication, ‘Clear Written Communications – The Easy English Style Guide’, is the perfect resource to help you write your next Easy English document.

You can request a copy by calling 1300 472 673 and asking for Scope’s Accessible Information service.

If you attend an Easy English training session, you will receive a complimentary copy.
Planning your Easy English project

When planning your Easy English project, you should think about:

• the type of document you want to produce - how-to guides, fact sheets and discussion papers make great Easy English resources
• your release date - it’s important to set the same release date for both the original and Easy English versions
• your document design - it’s a good idea to match the design of your Easy English document with the original
• distribution - let your audience know you have produced Easy English resources.

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. For more information, read our plain language fact sheet.

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 CALD backgrounds understand the information.

Keep in mind that people with low English literacy may find it difficult to read long documents. We suggest editing your original to a maximum of 10 pages of key information (think ‘need to know’ versus ‘nice to know’). And don’t forget a call to action - what does the reader need to do?
Print or web?

Easy English works best in A4 print format as there’s more space for larger text, double spacing and images. When you print, choose a matt paper that’s at least 100 gsm as shiny paper can make a document harder to read.

People access information in many ways, so it’s also important to make Easy English documents available on different platforms, including web.

It’s good practice to produce documents as accessible or tagged PDFs that can be downloaded from a web page. Accessible PDFs make it easier for people with low vision, who use screen readers, to read and understand the information.

Consumer testing

You can test your Easy English documents with people who have low English literacy. Consumers can give you direct feedback about language, layout, images and overall readability. Most consumers will need help to read the document during the process.

References

• ‘Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0’. Retrieved 25/9/13 http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/
• Scope ‘Clear Written Communications, The Easy English Style Guide’, 2015