

References

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WRITING IN PLAIN ENGLISH

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Rezumat

Articolul dat are în vizor importanța scrierii folosind un limbaj clar și pe înțelesul tuturor, care apare în limba engleză sub numele Plain English. Plain English (sau, în traducere, engleza simplă) este o formă de prezentare a informației într-o manieră ce ar facilita înțelegerea încă de la prima lecturare sau audiere. Termenul nicidecum nu se referă la utilizarea unui limbaj simplist, ci la utilizarea unei forme a limbii ce este directă, ușor de înțeles, care face uz de termeni cotidieni și evită pe cât de mult posibil terminologia de specialitate și structurile întortocheate, lungimea enunțului limitându-se la 15-20 de cuvinte.

"Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction."

Professor Robert Eagleson

Since many of the official documents and business writing are too long and excessively complicated using bureaucratic language and corporate jargon, which limit the ability to understand them, it is essential to try to make writing clearer and as concise as possible.

The main goal in any writing is to put forward the message in a way that the target audience understands it. Readers want an effortless, readable and clear writing style that makes use of plain language. Plain language is simple, which “does not mean simplistic. It means straightforward, clear and precise. It can be elegant and dramatic. It even can be beautiful” [1, p. 11].

Plain English, as any other plain language, is a style of writing information that helps people understand it the first time they read it. It involves using short, clear sentences and everyday words, explaining terms where it is impossible to avoid them and using a readable font. “A plain English document uses words economically and at a level the audience can understand. Its sentence structure is tight. Its tone is welcoming and direct. Its design is visually appealing. A plain English document is easy to read and looks like it’s meant to be read” [2, p. 5].

The necessity of using plain English arises from at least two reasons:

- It is impartial and non-discriminatory. Plain English gives people information in a language they can understand and helps them make informed choice. It is particularly important to provide information in plain English for people with literacy difficulty, and for those for whom English might not be the native language.

- It is understandable and makes good sense. Clearer information is shown to improve public sector performance, reduces mistakes and leads to fewer complaints and repeated questions.

A further very important benefit of using plain English is that it saves time and money. For instance, in 2006 a team in a US government department rewrote 400 form letters into plain English. Two years later, they had 18,000 fewer phone queries than the previous years. Staff processed more claims from people and felt better about their jobs because they were not answering the same questions repeatedly [3, p. 6].

Nowadays, in English-speaking countries, there is a growing move to simplify the language used in official and business documents since “many of these have become so convoluted that the intended message is lost” [4]. The movement is referred to as the Campaign for plain English.

In the UK, the plain English movement has existed since the 1970s. The main actors in plain English include local authorities, health services and large financial corporations.

Since 1979 when the campaign initiated the fight against “jargon and gobbledeygook”, the move has quickly spread all over the world, to all Anglophonic countries. Governmental documents, as well as forms, contracts and other type of writing from private banks, insurance, legal and consumer-oriented companies began to be issued using simple and easily understood language. The movement has resulted in new laws and regulations. For instance:

- In the United States, the most encouraging developments in the plain language movement came on 1 June when 1998 President Clinton issued his Executive Memorandum on plain language [1, p. 66]. The **Plain Writing Act of 2010** passed through the houses of Representatives in 2010. The Act requires the federal government to write all new public documents in a “clear, concise, well-organised” manner that follows plain language writing standards.

- In Australia, laws on income tax and road safety have been put into plain English and much of the movement towards using clearer language has come from state government and the legal profession.

- The Canadian government refers specifically to plain language in its 2012 communications policy, saying "To ensure clarity and consistency of information, plain language and proper grammar must be used in all communication with the public".

- The European Commission launched a **Clear Writing Campaign** in 2012. This campaign encourages staff to write more

clearly and make all types of documents, in all language, shorter and simpler.

The principles of writing in Plain English follow some simple, yet basic rules:

- *short sentences should replace longer ones*

This does not mean that all the sentences should be short and have the same length. The writing should be varied, in which long sentences alternate short ones, “following the basic principle of sticking to one main idea in a sentence, plus perhaps one related point” [5].

Most writing experts agree (e.g., Ann Wylie) that in clear writing the average length of a sentence should be between 15 and 20 words. According to a research by the American Press Institute, the above-mentioned expert refers to, “the longer your sentence, the less your reader will understand”. [6] The study shows that:

- when the average sentence length in a piece was fewer than eight words long, readers understood 100% of the story;

- even at 14 words, they could comprehend more than 90 % of the information;

- but move up to 43-word sentences and comprehension dropped to 10%.

- *short everyday words should be preferred*

This implies using common everyday words, words that are appropriate for your readers and they might most probably understand. Using the simplest word that fits is the best solution.

Avoid using jargon and legalese, unless you are writing to people who might understand the terms and words used.

- *the passive voice should be banished and replaced by active voice*

If you want your writing do be “crisp and professional” not “stuffy and bureaucratic” [5], use active voice instead of passive. Try to avoid passive voice as much as possible, as it

However, there are a few instances when passive voice might be more appropriate:

○To sound less hostile, e.g., “*this bill has not been paid*”, instead of “*you have not paid this bill*”.

○To avoid taking the blame, e.g. “*a mistake was made*” rather than “*we made a mistake*”.

○When you do not know who or what the doer is.

○If it simply sounds better.

- *make use of verbs to avoid nominalization*

This implies using abstract nouns when verbs could make the difference. Like in the case of passives, the excessive use of nouns makes reading more difficult and “over-loaded”. For instance, “*there will be a stoppage in our activity,*” sounds much more sophisticated, yet much more awkward than “*we will stop our activity*”.

- *be personal*

Using ‘you’, ‘we’ and ‘I’ in will help imagine the reader and make the tone of the written material warmer. It is easier for readers to engage with information when *you* address *them* directly.

- *using a variety of signposts*

Using lists for splitting up information, headings to organize your information into clear paragraphs and imperatives when giving instructions are good tips to make your writing clear and easy to read.

● *always check that “your writing is clear, helpful, human and polite” [5].*

Following the simple rules above can ensure good writing and hence a successful communication act. Using Plain English is not about breaking any grammatical rules – it is only about making what we write accessible and as useful as we intend it to be.

However, if you still have second thoughts about using Plain English consider the few examples below and draw your own conclusions.

Before: *“I declare that the foregoing particulars are correct and I hereby authorize the company to make whatever enquiries it considers necessary to process this application.”*

After: *“The above details are correct. The company may check any of my details to process this form.”*

Before: *“The proliferation of PCs throughout the organization and the ongoing implementation of the new computer system were identified as developments which will provide opportunities to address quality communications to the customers.”*

After: *“We identified that using extra computers and the new computer system will help us improve how we communicate to our customers.”*

[Examples taken from www.skillsyouneed.com]

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