PLAIN LANGUAGE; EASY ENGLISH. WHAT DOES IT ALL *MEAN*?

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Summary

- Plain Language and Easy English are two different ways that we can create Accessible Written Information.
- Everyone has different literacy skills.
- Our ability to read, understand and interpret what that information means for us can also be different. It can depend upon the topic, and our lived experience of that topic.
- The format used (plain Language or Easy English) will depend on the literacy needs of the intended audience.

Over the years, organisations and governments are becoming more aware of the need for Accessible Information. The term Accessible Information is not universally understood and means different things for different individuals. For example for someone from the Deaf community, it may be interpreted to mean having Auslan video clips of information. For someone who has low vision it may mean having the information in a large font such as size 18 font. For everyone in our community it is about having information that is easy to read and understand, irrespective of the topic and irrespective of the person's literacy.

Unfortunately, most content written for the public does not meet the basic criteria of being easy to read and understand. The language used is often very technical or only understood by people who work in that industry, for instance, medical staff. Sentence construction is often complex with many unwieldy embedded phrases, and multiple ideas in one sentence. Most sentences are constructed in a passive manner, Eg: 'The man was seen by the shark.' A simpler, easier sentence is an active one Eg; 'The shark saw the man.'

Plain Language is one means of adapting information for the audience. But, what is Plain Language? And who is the audience for Plain Language?

The current definition of Plain Language internationally is:
> A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.' (International Plain Language Federation, 2019; International Plain Language Federation, 2019.)

For examples of Plain Language go to US Centre for Plain Language.
www.centerforplainlanguage.org/learning-training/before-after-examples/

Although the definition for Plain Language is all inclusive, currently there is no evidence Plain Language practitioners routinely consider or develop publications for the needs of people with limited literacy. Instead Plain Language writers develop materials for specific topic areas. This information can be described as 'Medical Literacy,' 'Legal Literacy,' 'Financial Literacy,' or 'Mental Health Literacy.' The intended audience being described is someone from the general community. It is suggested that Plain Language materials are effective for the average 14 or 15 year old (Year 9 Australian school) reader and older. Plain Language writers are developing content for the 56% of the adult Australian population 'who **do** have the literacy to manage a range of day to day reading tasks.' (ABS, 2013. #4228).

So what about access to written information for the other 44% of the adult Australian population who **do not** have the literacy to manage a range of day to day reading tasks? (ABS 2013, #4228). Plain Language is not enough.

Easy English has been developed in Australia for the last 15 years. It provides the opportunity for many adult Australians for whom Plain Language is too complex to access information in a more meaningful manner. Internationally, the term Easy Read is common. The term has been used for at least 20 years in the UK, US and Scandinavia.

What is Easy English? At this time there is no accepted definition of Easy English. (See Appendix A for an example of Easy English.) Plain Language and Easy English are often confused. However, they are not the same. The target audience for Easy English may include a person who has limited literacy and:

- has a cognitive disability, or
- has poor educational outcomes, or
- reads English as a second language, or
- is from the Deaf community.

An individual can demonstrate a range of different literacy skills, depending upon things such as

- the topic they are reading about;
- life experience of that topic;
- current stress levels;
- time available to read the information;
- support to talk about the content, as it relates to themselves.

For an example of Easy English go to www.wdv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FINAL-for-web.pdf

As with Plain Language, Easy English has a set of guidelines. However, Easy English guidelines although not universally agreed on in the research literature, are similar across a range of countries (Anderson, J., et al. 2017). It is in the detail of an Easy English document that it becomes clear why a document is an Easy English one, rather than a Plain Language one. Checkpoints in the Easy English guidelines include:

- short sentences of 5-8 words each;
- all sentences in active tense;
- use of bullet points, rather than paragraphs or lengthy prose;
- one idea per sentence;
- everyday words of the audience;
- use of examples from the life experience of the audience;
- lots of white space;
- a minimum of size 14 font.

In addition, the selection and use of images is an important part of Easy English. Images are used to support a paragraph of content, or individual points. Images need to be clear and simple with white space around them.

Consumer engagement is critical and one of the most important parts in the development of Easy English documents. Getting feedback from the intended audience of the document will guide its development. For instance, assumed knowledge and logic of the document is explored with consumers. Other features such as the selection of words used. Eg: Which word is the consumer more likely to use in their everyday conversations: cinema, movies or pictures? The choice of vocabulary and images assist the individuals to relate to the information from their own lived experience.

Plain Language and Easy English are both highly relevant to any discussion about Accessible Information. It is in knowing who your audience is, that dictates the selected format. There maybe a need for both Easy English and Plain language in any suite of publications. Below is an example of a short paragraph translated into Plain Language and Easy English

Complex Language

We have recently implemented an enhancement to our computer system that will enable us to provide better service to our valued customers. This has resulted in a slight delay in the processing of your renewal. The difference you will notice is in the payment schedule. Your annual policy premium has been divided over 11 (eleven) months, and as a result your monthly payment will have increased due to the reduced number of monthly instalments.

Rewritten in plain language

We are a little late in sending your renewal documents because we have made a change in our computer system in order to provide better service. Your annual premium will now be divided over 11 months instead of 12 so the monthly payment will increase slightly.

Easy English

In **2009** you

- paid $ 50 each month

- paid this 12 times

- paid $ 600

In **2010** you

- will pay $ 54.55 each month

- will pay this 11 times

- will pay $ 600

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