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COLLABORATION



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President's Foreword

Dear PLAIN members,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the second PLAIN e-journal of 2023. This edition is on the theme

of "Collaboration", a topic always close to plain language practitioners' hearts.

Collaboration has been key to many of the changes occurring in the plain language world today: most notably, since our last journal came out, the ISO approved the plain language standard ISO 24495-1. Dr Neil James will be updating us on the IPLF's role in that process. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him and all the other PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language members who have worked tirelessly to make this happen, and continue to do so! The collaboration and dedication of the IPLF committees deserves to be recognized.

In fact at the upcoming conference, Clarity, the Center for Plain Language, and PLAIN will be recognizing Christopher Balmford's work in advancing the ISO plain language standard with a special award: Plain Language Above and Beyond.

This is the first in-person conference in four years, and PLAIN is delighted to be giving out its awards on site. The Christine Mowat Achievement Award goes to Ginny Redish for her work in plain language. The Cheryl Stephens Innovation Award goes to Brazilian NGO IrisLabs for their outstanding work running the Plain Language Program for the state of Ceará in Brazil since 2020.

This award is sponsored by WordRake, a software tool to improve professional writing.

For those of you who are unable to join us at the #PLAIN2023 conference, you will be pleased to know that there will be a daily podcast of highlights and interviews with keynote speakers. The podcast will be uploaded to PLAIN's website every day of the conference and promoted on our social media channels.

If you're interested to know who's speaking at the conference, you only need to read this journal for a taste, as several authors will also be speakers at the conference, such as Kate Harrison-Whiteside, Sarah Slabbert, and Professor Michael Blasie. As ever with PLAIN's e-journal, our editor has included a broad array of topics from a range of countries, from those with a well-established plain language program to those who are newer on the scene.

I look forward to seeing many of you shortly in Buenos Aires at the conference. For those of you who can't join us in person, please enjoy this journal and the daily podcast from the conference. At this year's AGM we will be celebrating PLAIN's 30th Anniversary virtually. In the run up to that, we'll be hearing from 30 plain language contributors. As I say, it's been a busy year and will continue to be so!

¡Hasta pronto!

Joanna Richardson
PLAIN President

Introduction

Hannah Sapunor-Davis
Managing Editor



There is a great quote by Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa that goes, “Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean.” This saying is helpful to me in times when I need to shift my perspective. Some

people, such as myself, work alone most of the time. Some may simply feel alone in their plain language work. And the work can feel small and insignificant. But this quote comforts me with the reminder that the power for effecting change lies in our combined efforts.

Collaboration in this field can come in many different forms: with users, with colleagues, with mentors, with international peers, even with technology. Each form of collaboration is valuable and contributes to the greater evolution of the plain language field. The writers of this issue offer their experience and advice for where and how to seek opportunities for collaboration in plain language. I hope the gathered wisdom here helps you in your current areas of teamwork or perhaps helps you prepare for future opportunities.

First, **James Hanington** starts our collaboration journey off with some tips for fostering a culture of plain language. His story details some practical advice, as well as aspirational messages for how to nurture a working environment where plain language is known, welcomed, and implemented at the first steps.

Then we have two contributions from our colleagues at the Institute for Language and Folklore in Sweden.

Ingrid Olsson and **Gabriella Sandström** describe their new mentor program, which is an opportunity for new plain language practitioners to be matched with experienced ones, enabling an empowering learning relationship for both sides. Then **Karin Webjörn** explains how cooperation with terminologists helps pave the way for clear language, as exemplified by her experience in the Sustainable Development Group.

We hear more practical experience and advice from **Victor González-Ruiz**, who coordinated the localization work among the Spanish-speaking volunteers involved with the ISO standard. His experience organizing work in a complex and dynamic project is sure to sound familiar to many of us, and will hopefully provide some useful insight into staying adaptable.

Then we get to learn about a few research projects related to plain language. First, **Michael Blasie** describes his research looking into the surprisingly vast amount of plain language laws in the US. This is followed by **Salli Kankaanpää** and **Aino Piehls’s** introduction of the European Languages and their Intelligibility in the Public Sphere research project, which gives a similar kind of overview of plain language policies in the EU.

Both US and European projects point out the potential for more international collaboration, in particular, the opportunity to exchange information and offer ideas to places where plain language laws are not currently in place.

Following that, **Mischa Corsius** and **Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer** detail their mixed-method research of government documents in The Netherlands and Belgium. Their approach to testing plain language is bound to give others ideas on how to combine the powers of testing and analysis to achieve robust and helpful insights.

Next, a topic on everyone’s minds these days: artificial intelligence. **Emily Halloran** describes the results of testing AI capabilities of editing a text into plain language. Whether you embrace it or fear it, AI is sure to play a big role in the future of writing and communication work. This article presents a vision of how we can use AI to strengthen our plain language work.

Our experts in this issue come from the Plain Language Academies. **Kate Harrison Whiteside** and **Sarah Slabbert** give us their view on collaboration in the plain language field—how it’s developed over time, as well as outlooks on how it can evolve further.

And finally, **Neil James** gives us the latest update from the International Plain Language Federation. Though we are still celebrating the release of the first international plain language standard, there is more work to do. There are exciting plans to further develop the standard and delve deeper into topics like training and certification, and of course, there will be plenty of opportunities for collaboration.

If you’re looking for plain language collaborators, reach out to our authors, post a message in one of our LinkedIn groups, or join us at a future in-person or virtual event. We invite all voices to contribute to the conversation. We are always open to ideas for future topics of the journal—as well as feedback on previous issues. Please reach out to us at publications@plainlanguagenetwork.org.

Happy reading!

Hannah Sapunor-Davis is a freelance editor specializing in clear communication. Originally from the United States, she is currently based in Germany.

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Start building a plain language culture today

mention the muddled thinking and deception that results when people intentionally write something without saying anything.

The struggle arises from the fact that most businesses and governments have yet to develop a way to make plain language their default attitude and behavior. Most tend to think of plain language as the product of style guides that dwell on proper punctuation and spelling, and whether this word and not that one should be capitalized.

Some others think of plain language as a last-minute editing process that is done after many drafts lead to an approved version. This plain language “washing” is better than nothing. But it doesn’t address lapses in logic, redundant thoughts, imperfect parallelisms, faulty shifts in voice, and many other flaws that undermine writers’ intelligence and diminish readers’ trust.

Plain language only becomes truly sustainable and effective when it is ingrained in the culture of an organization—when it is second nature to everyone within. A plain language culture exists when writers in a business or government department think and act with brevity and clarity foremost in their minds from the start of every communications task and project. Even more fundamental, a plain language culture exists when businesses and governments think and act on the belief that everyone in their organization is a writer and must be encouraged to think and act as such. When Canadians approach plain language from this perspective, they are ready to bring to life the

definitions and principles of plain language reliably and consistently.

Create a style to follow, a standard to reach, and a system to get there

In the late 1990s, we set out to build a plain language culture in our company. Before the idea of plain language had even emerged, we wanted to help our writing team make everything they write easy to read, understand, and use. In short, we wanted them to understand and apply the principles of plain language.

So we took three related actions. First, we developed an in-house writing style. Our style is based on the 36 most common flaws in English writing. We call them “fumbles”. They range from straightforward (errors in spelling) to complex (lapses in logic). Second, we set a plain language writing standard that members of our writing team could be trained to reach. The standard we chose was “fumble-free” writing. We made this choice because we knew that if we could eliminate all 36 fumbles from our writing consistently, we would set a quality standard higher than any group of writers in Canada.

And third, we established an internal peer-review system to reach our standard. To set up this system, we defined and codified each of the 36 fumbles. Then we mandated that each piece of writing of any genre—article, website text, advertising copy, video script, speech, social media posts, anything—must go through two rounds of peer review. In other words, we reviewed our peers’ writing to make sure it achieved our plain language writing standard.

We named our style, standard, and system Backdraft. We earned ISO 9002 certification for it in 1999, making our company the first and only writing firm in the world to be registered to the ISO 9002 quality standard. (The publication of the ISO 24495 plain language standard in June 2023 marks a related and significant milestone. This new standard promises to underpin a global plain language culture.)

Scale up a plain language culture from small teams to large organizations

The beauty of a cultural approach founded on style, standard, and system is that anyone, any group, any organization can nurture a plain language culture. In fact, not only have we built such a culture in our company, but we have also helped others build their own.

The main reason behind this success, as opposed to style guides and plain language washing, is that it fosters co-accountability among writing teams and throughout organizations. Each member of a team and organization is accountable for making sure their own writing rises to the standard and for making sure their colleagues’ writing reaches the same level.

Over time, as each writer within an organization writes and as the organization itself communicates with customers and the public, this co-accountability leads to a culture that prizes writing that is brief, clear, precise, logical—and therefore persuasive.

Plain language is liberating for writers, not just another process

We think the best thing about our approach to plain language culture is that it does not involve layering yet another process on top of other processes. It is inclusive, liberating, and powerful.

A plain language culture is inclusive for readers because it enables them to understand what they read the first time. A plain language culture is liberating for writers and writing teams because it enables them to write better and faster. A plain language culture is powerful for teams and organizations because it enables them to get their messages across reliably.

The power of such a culture should be brought to bear within organizations. It can be felt most keenly in corporate equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. There is nothing more inclusive than being understood the first time, all the time.

Best of all, Canadians of all stripes crave the inclusiveness and authenticity of plain language—whether or not they attach that exact label to it. They want the organizations they work in, businesses they deal with, and governments who serve them to communicate in a manner that is as human and real as they are. As writers, communicators, businesses, and governments, we should strive for nothing less.

James Hanington is CEO of Stiff, a family-owned, full-service strategic communications and design agency in Ottawa. James’s father, Brian, founded Stiff as a company of writers in 1988. James took over the business in 2014 and expanded Stiff’s offerings to include branding, positioning, design, video, digital, as well as writing services and training. Stiff’s approach is rooted in research and informed by equity, diversity and inclusion, accessibility, and plain language principles. As primary writing trainer, James led the re-launch of Backdraft, the world’s first ISO 9002 accredited online writing and editing training system that improves English writing for individuals, teams, and organizations.

Mentorship made life more fun for plain language workers

Ingrid Olsson and Gabriella Sandström
Language Council of Sweden

With a mentorship program, the Language Council of Sweden connected plain language workers just starting their work with experienced plain language experts. The program created interesting meetings and made the plain language work even more fun and a bit less lonely.

One of the tasks for the Language Council is to monitor how the plain language section of the Language Act is obeyed by the public agencies. The plain language section requires public language to be simple and comprehensible. To find out more about this, we at the Language Council conduct a national survey every five years.

According to our last survey, in 2019, as many as 81% of Swedish public agencies answered that they had worked with plain language during the last two years. This is a great result.

How is life for plain language workers?

We realized that we need more than a survey to get the full picture, so we decided to take a deeper look into the lives of those responsible for the plain language work out there. One of the things we did was to interview 13 plain language advisers from 13 different public agencies.

The result shows that being responsible for the plain language work in an organization is a job that most people find fun and rewarding. But it is also frustrating, as they often lack mandate and resources. In short, they have too little time and too little money, since plain language usually is not especially highly prioritized by the management. They also reported that their work can be very lonely, as they

are usually the only person working with plain language in their organization.

Can we make their work less lonely?

It is hard for us at the Language Council to provide financial resources, but we thought that at least we might be able to do something about people's sense of loneliness.

So, we initiated a mentorship program, on a small scale. We sent out a newsletter to our 500 plain language contacts asking if anybody wanted to participate in the program. We wanted experienced plain language advisers to share their knowledge with those about to start their work.

We soon received over 20 applications and were able to pair up 12 wise mentors with 12 eager mentees.



The instructions were simple: we want you to meet at least three times, digitally or in person. Our suggestion was that during the first meeting, the mentor describe their plain language work, explaining what they have done so far and reflecting on the result.

At the second meeting, the mentee would explain their situation and their thoughts and plans. And finally, at the third meeting, they would both discuss and reflect on how to progress. This discussion would not only help the mentees plan their upcoming work, but also give ideas to the experienced mentor on how to improve their own plain language work.

What did the participants think?

The program was a success. After six months, we emailed the 12 pairs and wondered how they were doing. Their answers speak for themselves:

“ This has been great for me,” said one of the mentees. “I have a super mentor. We have exchanged experiences and materials, and I got help to plan a plain language month at my agency. It is so nice to have someone likeminded to discuss things with and be inspired by. Our collaboration has also been the start for a network for all plain language advisers within the 21 organizations of our agency.”

From another happy mentee: “We have had interesting conversations and progressed from getting to know each other and talking about plain language at a general level, to hands-on discussions about actual tasks that needed to be solved. It has been very useful to exchange thoughts with my mentor.”

Her mentor agreed: “The greatest advantage, as I see it, is to have a designated person to share thoughts with. When you are alone at your workplace you need someone to talk to. It is often enough to say your thoughts out loud to get a feel for whether you are on the right track.”

Another mentor told us: “It is interesting to hear about what can be a problem in another organization, and to be able to come up with questions and suggestions, both in order to know more and to find parallels to your own work, but also in order to be able to suggest how to solve the problem. Talking about things you have done for a very long time gives you a chance to ponder upon what you could have done differently if you were to start all over again. I now realize that I have come quite far and that I have learned things that I can share, for example to do things in a correct order and tempo.”

What happens next?

We hope that the three suggested meetings will lay the foundation for a continuous collaboration and a lasting friendship. Our plan is to continue our mentorship program, even though we recently had a hard time recruiting new experienced mentors. For the moment, we have a bunch of eager mentees waiting in line. We might pair them up with each other, since we believe this

could also render some fruitful collaboration. Working together makes plain language work even more fun—and hopefully a bit less frustrating.

Ingrid Olsson and Gabriella Sandström are plain language experts at the Language Council of Sweden. The Language Council is a department within the Institute for Language and Folklore.

Mentorskap gör livet roligare för klarspråksarbetare

Ingrid Olsson and Gabriella Sandström

Språkrådet i Sverige

Med hjälp av ett mentorskapsprogram kopplade det svenska Språkrådet ihop klarspråksansvariga som precis startat sitt arbete med erfarna klarspråksexperten. Programmet resulterade i givande möten, och gjorde klarspråksarbetet ännu roligare och lite mindre ensamt.

En av Språkrådets uppgifter är att undersöka hur svenska myndigheter följer språklagens klarspråkparagraf. Paragrafen föreskriver att språket i offentlig verksamhet ska vara vardat, enkelt och begripligt. För att få reda på mer om detta genomför vi på Språkrådet en landsomfattande enkätundersökning vart femte år.

I vår senaste undersökning, som gjordes 2019, svarade så många som 81 procent av Sveriges myndigheter, kommuner och regioner att de arbetat med klarspråk under de senaste två åren. Ett fantastiskt resultat!

Hur mår de klarspråksansvariga?

Vi insåg att vi behövde mer än en enkät för att få en helhetsbild, så vi beslutade oss för att undersöka hur livet ser ut för dem som ansvarar för klarspråksarbetet ute i landet. Vi intervjuade 13 klarspråksansvariga på 13 olika myndigheter.

Intervjuerna visade att det är roligt och givande att ansvara för klarspråksarbetet på en myndighet. Men det är också frustrerande, eftersom det ofta saknas mandat och resurser. För lite tid och för lite pengar, helt enkelt, eftersom klarspråk sällan är särskilt högprioriterat hos ledningen. De berättade också att arbetet kan vara ganska ensamt, eftersom de oftast är den enda i sin organisation som arbetar med klarspråk.



Kan vi göra arbetet mindre ensamt?

Vi på Språkrådet kan inte bidra med resurser, men vi tänkte att vi åtminstone skulle kunna göra något åt ensamheten.

Därför drog vi igång ett mentorskapsprogram i liten skala. Vi skickade ut ett nyhetsbrev till våra 500 klarspråkskontakter och undrade om någon ville vara med. Vi ville få med erfarna klarspråksansvariga som kunde dela med sig av sin kunskap till noviser som just skulle dra igång sitt arbete. Vi fick snabbt in över tjugo anmälningar och kunde para ihop tolv kloka mentorer med tolv ivriga noviser.

Instruktionerna var enkla: vi vill att ni ska träffas minst tre gånger, digitalt eller fysiskt. Vi föreslog att mentorn under det första mötet skulle beskriva

sitt klarspråksarbete, vad hen hade gjort hittills och hur det hade gått. Under det andra mötet skulle novisen berätta om sin situation och dela med sig av sina tankar och planer. Slutligen, på tredje mötet, skulle de båda diskutera och fundera över bästa vägen framåt. Diskussionen skulle både hjälpa novisen att planera sitt kommande arbete och ge mentorn inspiration till förändringar och förbättringar.

Vad tyckte deltagarna?

Programmet blev en succé. Efter sex månader mejlade vi till de tolv paren och frågade hur det gick. Deras svar talar för sig själva:

”Det här har varit fantastiskt för mig”, säger en av noviserna. ”Jag har en supermentor. Vi har utbytt erfarenheter och material, och jag har fått hjälp att anordna en klarspråksmånad på min myndighet. Det är jätteskönt att ha en likasinnad att bolla med och inspireras av. Vårt samarbete har också varit startskottet för ett nätverk för alla klarspråksansvariga på landets 21 länsstyrelser.”

Från en annan nöjd novis: ”Vi har haft intressanta samtal och gått från att lära känna varann och prata om klarspråk på en generell nivå till handfasta diskussioner om en aktuell uppgift som behövde lösas. Det har varit mycket matnyttigt att få utbyta tankar och funderingar med min mentor.”

Hennes mentor håller med: ”Den största fördelen, som jag ser det, är att ha en utpekad person att lyfta tankar med. När man är ensam på sin arbetsplats behöver man någon att prata med. Ofta räcker det att man får ventilera sina tankar för att själv kunna känna om man är på rätt spår.”

En annan mentor berättar: ”Det är intressant att få höra om vad som kan vara problematiskt i en annan verksamhet, och få komma med frågor och förslag, dels för att få veta mer och dra paralleller till den egna verksamheten, dels för att kunna bistå med förslag på lösningar. Att prata om saker man själv gjort väldigt länge ger en chans till att fundera på hur man skulle kunna ha gjort i stället om man hade fått börja om från början. Man kan konstatera att man kommit en bit på vägen och lärt sig en hel del som man nu kan dela med sig av – till exempel att göra rätt saker i rätt ordning och tempo.”

Vad händer nu?

Vi hoppas att de tre föreslagna mötena blir början på ett fortsatt samarbete och en lång vänskap. Vår plan är att fortsätta med mentorskapsprogrammet, även om vi på senare tid haft lite svårt att hitta nya erfarna mentorer. Just nu har vi ett gäng noviser i kö. Kanske kommer vi att para ihop dem med varandra, eftersom vi tror

att det också kan eda till ett värdefullt samarbete.

Att samarbeta gör klarspråksarbetet ännu roligare – och förhoppningsvis lite mindre ensamt.

Ingrid Olsson och Gabriella Sandström, klarspråksansvariga på Språkrådet i Sverige. Språkrådet är en avdelning på Institutet för språk och folkminnen.



Karin Webjörn

Terminologist, The Institute for Language and Folklore

The foundation for successful terminology work is cooperation. When participants in a term group share different competencies, the group can create a collection of clear, accurate, and accessible terms. This article will discuss the conditions for working in a terminology group, and discuss The Terminology Group for Sustainable Development as a recent example of successful collaboration.

Terminology work – to minimize misunderstanding

The main purpose of terminology work is to minimize misunderstandings in communication between experts in a subject area. The terms—words that are used within a subject area in a specific meaning—have an important function in professional language communication. They stand for deeper knowledge and enable experts from the subject area to communicate with each other easily and effectively about the knowledge—provided that it is clear to everyone what the terms stand for and that they are used with that meaning. But sometimes

Cooperation leads to sustainable terms

confusion about concepts arises, often due to developments in the subject area. This leads to the need for new or revised terminology, and this is when terminology work becomes relevant.

Terminology work is teamwork

The work in a term group is best carried out in collaboration between terminologists and people with expertise in the relevant subject area. The role of the terminologists is to lead the work: to structure the knowledge, formulate definitions, construct examples, and give advice on term selection based on language usage and language systems. The role of the expert is to contribute knowledge in the subject area and knowledge of the technical language, as a guarantee that the terminology work is supported by the language used in that area. Without this anchoring, the chance that the terms will be accepted and established is very small.

Together, the participants in a term group thus create a jointly agreed knowledge of what the terms stand for. This also includes a certain degree of negotiation and compromise between experts on how their knowledge should be described. The result is presented in terminological entries that can be published in a term bank or in a term collection on a web page.

Terms used in common language

Sometimes we use terms in common language. This happens especially when a broader social development takes place and deeper knowledge in a subject area becomes relevant to people other than the experts.

The terms are often conveyed via the media, in political contexts, in marketing, or by other actors who have a prominent role in a wider public discussion. Quite often, the terms then lose their specific meaning and we use them, more or less consciously, to arouse certain associations rather than to convey complex and important knowledge: They become so-called buzzwords. Then it may be appropriate to use terminological methods to clarify what is meant by a certain term and how the term or other expressions should be used in order to be as clear and correct as possible for as many people as possible. In these cases, the cooperation in a term group needs to be expanded beyond the terminologist's knowledge of terminology methods and the experts' knowledge of their own specialist area. A journalist or a communicator can, for example, contribute valuable knowledge about more general language usage and how the results should be spread to a large target group. A professional translator can ensure that the relationship between different language versions is correct.

Terminology Group for Sustainable Development—a term group with all of us as the target group

A good example of this expanded collaboration is the Terminology Group for Sustainable Development that was formed by the Language Council of Sweden in Spring 2021. The purpose of the work is to clarify and make available terms and concepts within the subject area of sustainable development and thus facilitate communication and knowledge

sharing between, for example, researchers, journalists, politicians, and the public. This subject area is important to each of us as it cuts across all other subject areas and the development of knowledge takes place quickly.

It is also a global issue and the working language is English, which leads to difficulties in describing the concepts in Swedish and finding Swedish equivalents for English expressions. This is noticeable in various areas of the public discussion, and not least in the questions put to the Language Council of Sweden.

In order to take in perspectives from the different parts of society where the terms are used, the Terminology Group for Sustainable Development has representatives from the scientific community, authorities, interest organizations, the media, and of course language planners and terminologists. Since many of the terms in question come into Swedish through English, a specialist translator is also a part of the group. Everyone contributes with their special skills to ensure that the recommendations are as accurate and understandable as possible. The result of the work is presented in the [Collection of Sustainability Terms](#).

More than terms and definitions

Of course, the term group does regular terminological work such as recommending terms and defining concepts. But since many of the concepts in this subject area are important outside the sphere of the experts, other linguistic perspectives need to be described. In addition, many of the concepts are very complex and can be difficult to understand through a definition, however accurate it may be.

Therefore, in each terminological entry, there is a paragraph with additional information about the concept, for example encyclopedic information, examples, advice on how the term can be used in different contexts, and also comments about differences in language use between English and Swedish.

Some of the concepts have a central role in legal contexts, for example biological diversity. Therefore, the terminological entry contains both a pure and short definition of the concept and a longer more complex legal definition that was developed in the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1993.

Other terms that have been used for a long time need to be updated to reflect today's society. The term *naturgas* (English: natural gas) was established in the 19th century when the aspect that the gas was formed naturally, as opposed to artificially, was relevant. Today, that aspect is not relevant. The fact that gas has a fossil origin is, however, all the more relevant to make visible in these days, when it is absolutely necessary for us to stop burning fossil fuels. That is one of the reasons why the term group recommended using the term *fossilgas*, which is also established among experts, rather than *naturgas*.

The group also discusses and problematizes expressions that occur frequently in the public discussion, but which are not used as terms but as vague buzzwords, for example, *sustainable*, *green*, and *environmentally friendly*.

Good discussions and continuous work

Having persons with different competences in a term group is of course not enough for a good collaboration to occur. There is also a need for open-minded discussions where participants feel free to share their perspectives and ways of using an expression, as well as being open towards others.

Not least, persistent and continuous work is needed. The Terminology Group for Sustainable Development has been working together for just over two years, sharing knowledge and experience with good results. The Collection of Sustainability Terms currently contains 35 terminological entries. But many concepts are on hold and the group continues the collaboration to contribute clear and accessible terms for a more effective and clearer public discussion on sustainable development.

Karin Webjörn is a terminologist at The Language Council, a department within the Institute for Language and Folklore. She has a degree in Language Consultancy from Stockholm University. Besides being a terminologist in the Terminology Group of Sustainable Development, she works with Rikstermbanken (Sweden's National Term Bank).



Karin Webbjörn

Terminolog på Språkrådet, Institutet för språk och folkminnen

Grunden för ett lyckat terminologiarbete är samarbete. När deltagare i en termgrupp delar olika kompetenser kan gruppen skapa en samling av tydliga, korrekta och tillgängliga termer. Den här artikeln kommer att presentera förutsättningarna för att arbeta i en termgrupp och kommer att ta upp Hållbarhetstermgruppen som ett färskt exempel på framgångsrikt samarbete.

Terminologiarbete – för att minimera missförstånd

Det främsta syftet med terminologiarbete är att minimera missförstånd i kommunikationen mellan sakkunniga inom ett ämnesområde. Termerna, det vill säga ord som används inom ämnesområdet i en avgränsad betydelse, har en viktig funktion i fackspråklig kommunikation. De står för en djupare kunskap och möjliggör för ämneskunniga att enkelt och

Samarbete ger hållbara termer

effektivt kunna kommunicera med varandra om kunskapen – förutsatt att det är tydligt för alla vad termerna står för och att de används med den innebörden. Men det händer att begreppsförvirring uppstår, ofta för att utveckling inom ämnesområdet har lett till behov av ny terminologi, och det är särskilt då terminologiarbete blir relevant.

Terminologiarbete är ett lagarbete

Arbetet i en termgrupp bedrivs bäst i samverkan mellan terminologer och ämnesexperter, det vill säga personer med sakkunskap inom det aktuella ämnesområdet. Terminologernas roll är att leda arbetet; att strukturera kunskapen, formulera definitioner, konstruera exempel och ge råd om termval utifrån språkbruk och språkssystem. Ämnesexpertens roll är att bidra med sin ämneskunskap och kännedom om fackspråket, som en garanti för att terminologiarbetet har stöd i språkbruket inom området. Utan denna förankring är chansen att termerna ska accepteras och etableras mycket liten. Tillsammans skapar termgruppen alltså en gemensamt överenskommen kunskap om vad termerna står för. Därmed ingår även en viss grad av förhandling och kompromissande mellan ämnesexperter om hur deras kunskap ska beskrivas. Resultatet presenteras i termposter som kan publiceras i en termbank eller i en termsamling på en webbsida.

Termer som används i allmänspråket

Det händer att termer börjar användas i allmänspråket, exempelvis när en större samhällsutveckling

sker och djupare kunskap inom ett ämnesområde blir relevant för fler än bara ämnesexperterna. Ofta förmedlas termerna via medier, i politiska sammanhang, i marknadsföring eller av andra aktörer som har en framträdande roll i den bredare samhällsdiskussion. Ganska ofta förlorar termerna då sin specifika innebörd, och vi använder dem, mer eller mindre medvetet, för att väcka känslor snarare än att förmedla komplex och samhällsviktig kunskap: De har blivit så kallade signalord.

Då kan det vara på sin plats att ta till terminologiska arbetsmetoder för tydliggöra vad som avses med en viss term, hur den eller andra uttryck bör användas för att vara så begripliga och korrekta som möjligt för så många som möjligt. I dessa fall behöver samarbetet i en termgrupp vidgas bortom terminologens kunnande i terminologilärens metoder och de ämneskunnigas kännedom om det egna fackområdet. En journalist eller en kommunikatör kan exempelvis bidra med värdefull kunskap om ett mer generellt språkbruk och om hur resultatet ska spridas till en större målgrupp. En facköversättare kan säkerställa att förhållandet mellan olika språkversioner är korrekt.

Hållbarhetstermgruppen – en termgrupp med oss alla som målgrupp

Ett gott exempel på detta vidgade samarbete är Hållbarhetstermgruppen som bildades av Språkrådet under våren 2021. Syftet med termgruppens arbete är att tydliggöra och tillgängliggöra termer och

begrepp inom ämnesområdet hållbar utveckling och på så vis underlätta kommunikation och kunskapspridning mellan exempelvis forskare, journalister, politiker och allmänhet.

Ämnesområdet är angeläget för var och en av oss, det går på tvärs över alla andra ämnesområden och kunskapsutvecklingen sker snabbt. Frågan är global och arbetspråket är engelska, vilket leder till svårigheter att beskriva begreppen på svenska och att finna svenska motsvarigheter till engelska uttryck. Det märks på olika håll i samhällsdiskussionen, och inte minst i de frågor som ställs till Språkrådet.

Det är nödvändigt att ta in perspektiv från olika delar av samhället där termerna används och därför finns i Hållbarhetstermgruppen representanter från forskarvärlden, myndigheter, intresseorganisationer och medier, och förstås språkvårdare och terminologer. Många av termerna som är aktuella kommer in i svenskan i engelsk språkdräkt och därför finns också en facköversättare med i gruppen. Alla bidrar med sin speciella kompetens för att rekommendationerna ska bli så korrekta och begripliga som möjligt. Resultatet av arbetet presenteras i [termsamlingen Hållbarhetstermlistan](#).

Mer än termer och definitioner

Termgruppen arbetar förstås med traditionellt terminologiskt arbete som att rekommendera termer och definiera begrepp. Men eftersom många av de begrepp som gruppen tar sig an är viktiga även utanför ämnesexperternas sfär, behöver fler språkliga perspektiv beskrivas.

Dessutom är många av begreppen mycket komplexa, och det kan vara svårt att förstå komplexiteten genom en definition hur korrekt den än är. Därför finns i varje termpost ett stycke med ytterligare information om begreppet, exempelvis encyklopedisk information, konkreta exempel, rekommendationer om språkbruk i sammanhang där målgruppen inte känner till ämnesområdet och kommentarer om skillnader i språkbruk mellan engelskan och svenskan.

Vissa begrepp har en central roll i juridiska sammanhang, exempelvis biologisk mångfald. Därför innehåller den termposten både en renodlad, korrekt och enkel definition av begreppet och den sedan tidigare etablerade juridiska definitionen som togs fram i Konventionen om biologisk mångfald från 1993. Andra termer har använts länge men behöver uppdateras för att återspegla dagens samhälle. Termen naturgas (eng. natural gas) etablerades i slutet av 1800-talet när det relevant att synliggöra att gasen bildats på naturlig väg, till skillnad från artificiell. Idag är den aspekten inte alls relevant, men däremot att gasen har fossilt ursprung. Synonymen fossilgas, som också är etablerad bland ämnesexperter, återspeglar däremot detta, vilket är en av anledningarna till att termgruppen rekommenderade att hellre använda fossilgas än naturgas.

Gruppen diskuterar och problematiserar också uttryck som förekommer flitigt i samhällsdiskussionen, men som inte används som termer utan som vaga

signalord, det vill säga för att väcka vissa associationer snarare än att förmedla kunskap, exempelvis hållbar, grön och miljövänlig.

Gott diskussionsklimat och kontinuerligt arbete

Men det räcker förstås inte bara med olika kompetenser i en termgrupp för att ett gott samarbete ska uppstå. Det behövs också ett diskussionsklimat där deltagare vågar dela med sig av sina perspektiv och sätt att använda ett uttryck på, liksom öppenhet inför andras. Inte minst behövs enträget och kontinuerligt arbete. Hållbarhetstermgruppen har arbetat tillsammans i drygt två år, delat kunskap och erfarenheter med gott resultat: Hållbarhetstermlistan innehåller idag 35 termposter. Men många begrepp står på tur och gruppen fortsätter sitt samarbete med att bidra med tydliga och tillgängliga termer för en effektivare och tydligare samhällsdiskussion om hållbar utveckling.

Karin Webbjörn är terminolog på Språkrådet, en avdelning inom Institutet för språk och folkminnen. Hon är examinerad språkkonsult i svenska vid Stockholms universitet. Utöver arbetet som terminolog i Hållbarhetstermgruppen arbetar hon med Rikstermbanken, Sveriges nationella termbank.



Víctor González-Ruiz

Lecturer in Legal Translation, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain Volunteer in the IPLF's ISO Standard Localization and Implementation Committee

In February 2021, the ISO Standard Localization and Implementation Committee held its first meeting with volunteers from very diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In the words of its chair, Gael Spivak, [this committee's goal](#) was to help countries around the world adopt the ISO standard for plain language.

For any country with an official language other than English, adopting the standard usually means localizing (that is, translating and adjusting) it to its own language and culture. This being so, the committee decided that we should coordinate the standard's translation between countries that share a common language.

I was tasked with coordinating the localizing work in Spanish. To this end, I brought together a group of Spanish-speaking plain language experts and professionals. What follows is an account of my (our) experience—the

One language, diverse views: Collaborating between Spanish-speaking experts to promote ISO's plain language standard

steps we have taken so far, and what the future may bring.

The beginnings

Plain language expert and consultant Romina Marazzato came on board from the onset to help coordinate the group. Hers was the idea to start an account on the Slack app as a forum for discussion (instead of a conventional mail group). To give it some order, we set up a separate Slack channel for each principle in the standard.

At this early stage, we had recruited only a few people, most of them based in Spain. We introduced them to the project and the Slack forum in a series of email messages and via GoToMeeting in May and June 2021.

Our initial aim was to arrive at a Spanish version of the draft ISO standard. This translation would serve as a template for the adoption of the standard in the several Spanish-speaking countries. In the process, we would exchange our views on the contents of the standard and discuss whether its language-neutral approach befitted Spanish as expected.

At our first online gathering, the participants raised several questions. Some of them had to do with the scope and other basic features of the standard, and these had simple answers. But others required a more thorough study, as one referred to the need of empirical (scientific) evidence to support the principles and strategies in the standard.

The people

The question of who should take part in our group was an easy one—we wanted as many people as possible, from as many countries as possible. This would guarantee more varied opinions in our discussions. It would also result in a translation of the standard better suited to adapt to different uses and sensibilities within the Spanish-speaking world.

As to the profile of the participants, they were professionals, both in the private and the public spheres, who used plain language as one of their working tools. There were also academics who focused their research on plain language. Some of the members also belonged to their respective national standards bodies.

Today, almost 30 volunteers are involved in the group. They come mostly from Spain and Argentina, but also from Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and the United States. We know that they represent only a tiny part of the plain language community in Spanish, so our aim is to keep the group growing with the help of present members.

Our progress

Very early on, we had some bad news from the ISO: we could not share the draft standard because it was protected by the ISO copyright. This meant that we could not work on a draft translation (no source text available) or discuss any feature of the standard in detail. In other words, we had to change course and redefine our aim until the ISO published the final standard.

At first, this drawback led to the group having almost no activity for some months. Then, some of us engaged in translating the communications materials that Gael's committee had created to promote the standard. We did this in a coordinated way, always involving two people in any translation task, and looking for consistency in the Spanish terms used.

Once they were ready, we sent the promotional materials in Spanish out to the members of the group. We asked them to share them on their social networks and among their colleagues. For now, we could only raise awareness about the (then) upcoming standard and request our group to do likewise.

The present

In the meantime, we transferred the conversation to Outlook, where the group has taken the form of an ever-growing contact list. On this new platform, we have reignited the group's activity by encouraging members to exchange plain language-related information about events or publications by email. We have become a forum for people from both sides of the Atlantic, which is welcoming news.

Now that ISO has finally published the standard, and we finally have access to it, it is time to re-route our efforts again. Translating the standard and promoting it in Spanish-speaking countries should be our priority. And we should do this by collaborating with each other and by sharing each participant's national experiences.

Luckily, we are not starting from scratch. We already have a group of experts and practitioners excited about the standard and eager to make it known. And meanwhile, we have also developed some localizing tools—Nicole Fernbach and Torunn Reksten have collaborated with us to create an incipient English-Spanish-French lexicon for the translation of the standard.

The future

Our experience so far reveals that many challenges may lie ahead. Each country has its own plain language history and circumstances, and each of them may also have its own view on how to adopt the standard. This means that the potential for disagreement is high.

But however the differences, we must build on our common language, interests, and needs. And we must take advantage of our forum as a space for working together and exchanging knowledge. This channel for communication should help us make better-informed decisions—whatever these decisions are.

If you want to join the group and help adopt the standard in Spanish, [write to me](#). If you want to join the Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee, or know more about their work, [write to its chair, Gael Spivak](#).

Victor González-Ruiz has worked for about 25 years as a lecturer in legal translation at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain and as a part-time official translator. He is particularly committed to achieving clarity in legal translations and has made it the focus of his teaching, practice, and study. He is a member of PLAIN and Clarity (Spain's representative), as well as a part of the Federation's efforts to promote the ISO's plain language standard in the Spanish-speaking world.



Víctor González-Ruiz

Profesor de traducción jurídica (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, España)
Voluntario en el Comité de Localización e Implementación de la Norma ISO de la Federación Internacional de Lenguaje Claro

En febrero de 2021, el Comité de Localización e Implementación de la Norma ISO celebró su primera reunión con voluntarios de lenguas y culturas muy diversas. En palabras de su presidenta, Gael Spivak, el objetivo de este comité era el de apoyar a países de todo el mundo a adoptar la norma ISO de lenguaje claro.

Para los países que no cuentan con el inglés entre sus lenguas oficiales, adoptar la norma implica localizarla (es decir, traducirla y ajustarla) a su propia lengua y cultura. Ante esta realidad, el comité creyó conveniente que debíamos coordinar la traducción de la norma entre los países que compartieran un mismo idioma.

A mí se me asignó la tarea de coordinar el trabajo de localización al español. Con este fin, reuní a varios expertos y profesionales del lenguaje claro en esta lengua. A continuación, relataré cuál ha sido mi (nuestra)

Una sola lengua, puntos de vista diversos: la colaboración entre expertos de lengua española para promover la adopción de la norma ISO de lenguaje claro

experiencia hasta ahora: los pasos que hemos dado y lo que puede traernos el futuro.

El comienzo

Romina Marazzato, experta y asesora en el ámbito del lenguaje claro, se unió para ayudar a coordinar el grupo desde el comienzo. Suya fue la idea de abrir una cuenta en la aplicación Slack que sirviera de foro de debate (en lugar de un grupo de correo convencional). Dentro de esta aplicación, creamos un canal distinto para cada uno de los principios rectores de la norma ISO.

En esta primera fase, aún eran pocos los participantes en nuestro foro y la mayoría de ellos procedían de España. Les presentamos el proyecto y el foro en Slack por medio de mensajes de correo electrónico y de una reunión virtual en mayo y junio de 2021.

Nuestra meta inicial era la de elaborar una versión en español del borrador de la norma ISO. Esta versión podría servir de base para que los países de habla hispana adoptaran la norma en sus respectivos territorios. A la vez, queríamos intercambiar opiniones sobre el contenido de la norma y debatir si, como se había previsto, esta se ajustaba bien a las peculiaridades del idioma español.

En nuestra primera reunión online, los participantes plantearon varias preguntas. Algunas permitían una respuesta sencilla, como las que tenían que ver con el alcance de la norma y con otros aspectos básicos de esta. Sin embargo, otras exigían respuestas más meditadas, como la que se refería

a la necesidad de basar los principios y estrategias de la norma en evidencias (científicas).

Los participantes

Para la pregunta sobre quién debía formar parte de nuestro grupo, la respuesta era sencilla: tantas personas y de tantos países como fuera posible. Por un lado, esto daría lugar a una mayor variedad de opiniones en nuestros debates. Por el otro, tendríamos más garantías de que nuestra versión en español de la norma se ajustaría sin problemas a las distintas sensibilidades y usos lingüísticos de los diversos países de habla hispana.

Con respecto al perfil de los participantes, estos eran profesionales que usaban el lenguaje claro como una de sus herramientas de trabajo, tanto en el sector privado como en el público. También había investigadores que estudiaban el lenguaje claro. Algunos de ellos pertenecían a las agencias normalizadoras de sus respectivos países.

En la actualidad, hay casi 30 voluntarios en el grupo. La mayoría proviene de España y Argentina, pero también hay participantes de Chile, México, Colombia y Estados Unidos. Somos conscientes de que representamos una parte minúscula de la comunidad del lenguaje claro en español, pero nuestro objetivo es seguir creciendo con el apoyo de los miembros actuales.

Los avances

Nada más comenzar, ISO nos dio una mala noticia: no podíamos

compartir el borrador de la norma por estar protegida por sus derechos de propiedad intelectual. Esto implicaba que no podríamos elaborar un borrador de traducción (pues no contábamos con un texto original) ni comentar ningún aspecto del contenido de la norma en profundidad. En otras palabras, debíamos redirigir nuestros esfuerzos hasta que ISO publicara la norma definitiva.

En un primer momento, este inconveniente provocó que el grupo estuviera inactivo durante varios meses. Después, sin embargo, algunos de los participantes nos dedicamos a traducir el material promocional que el comité presidido por Gael había creado para dar a conocer la norma. Esto lo hicimos de modo coordinado, con 2 personas a cargo de cada tarea de traducción y asegurando la coherencia en los términos usados en español.

Cuando lo tuvimos traducido, enviamos el material de promoción en español a los participantes en el grupo. Les pedimos que lo difundieran por medio de sus redes sociales y entre sus colegas de profesión. Por el momento, lo único que podíamos hacer era divulgar la existencia y las ventajas de la norma (aún por aprobar en aquel momento) y pedir a nuestro grupo que hiciese lo mismo.

El presente

Durante este proceso, trasladamos nuestro debate a Outlook, donde el grupo se ha convertido en una lista de correo con cada vez más participantes. En esta nueva plataforma, hemos impulsado la actividad del grupo

animando a sus miembros a intercambiar información sobre actos o publicaciones relacionados con el lenguaje claro. De este modo, nos hemos convertido en un foro que reúne a interesados de ambos lados del Atlántico, lo cual es una muy buena noticia.

Ahora que ISO ha publicado la norma y ya podemos acceder a ella, es hora de redirigir de nuevo nuestros esfuerzos. Nuestra prioridad debería ser traducir la norma y promocionarla en los países de habla hispana. Y deberíamos hacerlo colaborando unos con otros y compartiendo las experiencias locales de cada uno de los participantes.

Por suerte, no partimos de cero. Ya contamos con un grupo de expertos y profesionales convencidos de la utilidad de la norma y deseosos de darla a conocer. Igualmente, contamos con herramientas para localizar la norma; por ejemplo, Nicole Fernbach y Torunn Reksten han colaborado con nosotros para crear la versión incipiente de un léxico inglés-español-francés para la traducción del nuevo documento.

El futuro

La experiencia que hemos tenido hasta el momento nos indica que el futuro nos planteará muchos retos. Cada país tiene su propio recorrido e historia en lo tocante al lenguaje claro, y es probable que cada uno tenga también su propia opinión sobre cómo adoptar la norma. En resumen, parece que los puntos de vista van a ser, en potencia, muy diversos.

Pero, a pesar de las diferencias, debemos avanzar a partir de nuestra lengua, nuestros intereses y nuestras necesidades comunes. Y debemos aprovechar el foro ya abierto para trabajar juntos e intercambiar conocimiento. Este canal de comunicación debería ayudarnos a tomar mejores decisiones, sean cuales sean las decisiones que finalmente tomemos.

Si deseas unirme a este grupo y fomentar la adopción de la norma en lengua española, escríbeme. Si deseas colaborar con el Comité de Localización e Implementación de la Norma ISO de la Federación, o saber más acerca de cómo funciona, escribe a su presidenta, Gael Spivak.

Víctor González-Ruiz es profesor de traducción jurídica en la Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (España) y traductor-intérprete jurado desde hace aproximadamente 25 años. La claridad en la traducción de textos jurídicos se ha convertido en el foco de su enseñanza, práctica profesional e investigación. Es miembro de PLAIN y representante en España de Clarity, y colabora con la Federación para promocionar la norma ISO de lenguaje claro en el mundo hispanoparlante.



Michael A. Blasie
Assistant Professor of Law, Seattle
University School of Law

Are plain language laws a good idea? United States lawmakers think so. I spent the last two and one-half years researching all the plain language laws in the United States. I found 768 laws passed by one of the 50 US states or the national government. But my updated research puts the total closer to 1,000, and every month US lawmakers propose more. But whether these laws help achieve plain language is unknown.

I write to suggest the plain language community begin tracking plain language laws across the world to begin an international dialogue on whether and when plain language laws promote plain language. But before we start comparing data, we need to coordinate methodology. Here are a few of the major research method questions I came across and how I answered them.

Coordinating international plain language law research

What is a plain language Law?

Researchers must determine (1) what counts as a “law” and (2) what counts as a “plain language law.” As a lawyer and law school professor, I defined “law” as something the government creates through a formal process that can bind others. In the United States, different branches of government can create different kinds of laws. These laws include constitutions, statutes, regulations, and rules.

To determine which laws were plain language laws, I set a criteria: the law must set a writing standard that could affect a reader’s understanding of the document.

How do you find plain language laws?

Not every plain language law necessarily contains the term plain language. Finding these laws may require creative research. Based on how other scholars spoke about plain language laws, I searched for laws that contained the terms plain language, plain English, readable, readability, or Flesch. These terms are both overinclusive and underinclusive. Sometimes I found laws that contained these terms but were not plain language laws. I also found plain language laws that contained none of these terms.

Why do lawmakers create plain language laws?

For decades, the plain language movement has encouraged voluntarily adopting plain language. Therefore, researchers should investigate why lawmakers choose to pass a plain language law instead of relying on voluntary adoption. Perhaps a group lobbied

the lawmaker, or maybe voluntary efforts failed, or maybe the lawmaker responded to a recent event or new research. I found too many laws to research the history behind each one, but have begun tracking the reasons behind new proposed plain language laws.

What documents do the plain language laws cover?

The scope of United States plain language laws vary. Some laws cover thousands of kinds of documents. Others cover one kind of document. While others cover a particular part of one kind of document. The immense scope raises challenges to categorizing them. In my research I chose to track two characteristics of a law’s scope.

The first characteristic was the kind of drafter. If a government employee drafted the document, then I labeled the law a public sector plain language law. If a private sector employee drafted the document, then I labeled the law a private sector plain language law.

The second characteristic was the covered document’s topic. I divided the private sector and public sector laws into the following sub-categories of topics:

Private Sector Laws

- Consumer protection
- Commercial contract
- Corporate and financial disclosures
- Employment
- Environment
- Healthcare
- Housing and property
- Individual consents and waivers
- Litigation
- Wildlife records

Public Sector Laws

- All-government
- Executive function
- Judicial function
- Lawmaking function

Some laws fit into one sub-category, others into multiple.

What standard do plain language laws require?

US lawmakers have many different ways of setting a standard. In general, they fit within one of four categories: Descriptive Standards describe the document using abstract undefined terms. For example, a Descriptive Standard might require a document use plain language but not define the term. Or a Descriptive Standard might require the document to be “understandable to the average reader.”

Readability Standards require a document to achieve a certain score on a readability test. These tests usually apply a formula to measure objective criteria in a document, like the length of words and sentences.

Features Standards present a list of features a document must contain and a list of features a document cannot contain. For example, a Features Standard might require a document to use simple sentences and headers, while prohibiting a document from using jargon.

Hybrid Standards combine a Readability Standard with a Features Standard, or offer a choice between both.

How are the plain language laws enforced?

US plain language laws have massive enforcement differences, including whether they are enforceable and, if so, what the remedy is. Here are the main questions I asked: Can anyone enforce the law? If so, who? Individuals, the government? When someone enforces the law, what can they get? Money? If a document does not comply, is it still valid? Are there special defenses to the law like a good faith defense?

What is the effect of the plain language laws?

I have not yet attempted to answer this question for US plain language laws but wonder about two questions: Do drafters comply with the laws? If so, what are the effects and how can researchers measure them?

Conclusion

The method I described is not perfect. I offer it to spark a global discussion. Greater international coordination of plain language law research will help us determine if these laws work and provide valuable data to the plain language community. Coordinating research methods, determining what characteristics to track, agreeing on names for those characteristics, and sharing results could establish a scholarly field in plain language law research and provide information critical to lawmakers and plain language supporters.

One step forward could be PLAIN creating an international working group with a researcher or team of researchers representing different countries much like it does with PLAIN ambassadors. This group could coordinate methodology, exchange data, and provide updates so all PLAIN members have a sense of the state of plain language laws globally.

Michael Blasie is an Assistant Professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law. He is the leading United States expert on plain language laws and his research is available [here](#). Professor Blasie presents internationally on designing legal documents, including in India, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. He authored the first comprehensive analysis of plain language laws: United States Plain Language Laws. Professor Blasie serves as a writing instructor for the National Judicial College, where he teaches judges from across the world how to improve their writing. He graduated from New York University School of Law and Hamilton College.



Salli Kankaanpää and Aino Piehl
Institution for the Languages of Finland

Most European countries have policies and actions to ensure that public authorities communicate efficiently and inclusively. These policies concern the use of plain language, terminology, easy language, and gender-neutral language, among others.

What kinds of similarities and differences are there in these policies and actions? You can find answers to this question in the data survey on European Languages and their Intelligibility in the Public Sphere (ELIPS), a pioneer project mapping the engagement of public authorities throughout Europe in fields relating to communication with citizens.

The survey covers the situation in most countries and language areas that are represented in the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL). It contains information on 27 official languages

European Languages and their Intelligibility in the Public Sphere: A survey of plain language in 24 countries

spoken in 24 European countries. The data were collected in 2018–2019 and published in 2021.

The results are useful for governments and policy bodies when comparing their national situation with other countries. They are of interest to all organizations and specialists working in the fields covered by the survey, not only in Europe but all over the world, and they can inspire academic research as well. The survey also includes data about national and international cooperation in the fields represented in the survey.

Plain language is a well-established field

In most participating countries there is public interest in the use of plain language by governments and in public administration. Accordingly, there are institutions responsible for maintaining plain language policies and providing plain language services in most countries.

Explicit policies for plain language are usually laid down in recommendations by central governments or in legal provisions and regulations. Some countries even give their citizens the right to refuse unclear information.

There are various methods to help public administrations comply with the policies in practice. Most countries have plain language guidelines as well as web services. In addition, civil servants get specific training in language use, effective writing, and communication. In many countries they can also use templates and style checkers, complexity-of-text

predictors, or other kinds of digital tools to help ensure that the message is understood.

Campaigns, prizes, and competitions are popular ways of promoting plain language policies: they are used in more than half of the countries. Awards are given for the clearest text, the best author, or the best promoter of plain language. In Wales, it is possible to obtain a quality seal.

In one-third of the countries, the effect of plain language policies is measured using indicators such as user satisfaction or efficiency. For example, the authorities in Norway have developed an online toolbox with methods for user involvement and measuring results.

Despite the great interest and wide range of activities in plain language, less than half of the national language institutions in the countries in the survey state that they are involved in international cooperation in this field. Of course, there are organizations, enterprises, or individual actors in the rest of EFNIL member countries who are members or are otherwise internationally active.

Interest in inclusive communication could increase

Over the last few years, sensitivity towards aspects of inclusive communication has increased in Europe as in other parts of the world. This can be seen in the ELIPS survey in such fields as social, cultural, and gender diversity, which are considered essential elements of inclusiveness and are important

aspects when producing plain language as well. In the policies for good communication in Europe, these fields are still less well established or more recent than plain language or terminology. This goes also for easy language, a special variety for addressing those with reading or comprehension barriers.

Nowadays, most European countries have official guidelines on the use of gender-neutral language and other gender aspects, but only some have instructions on how to take cultural diversity, sexual preferences, disabilities, mental health, religion, nationality, or age into account in public authorities' communication. Beside general instructions, civil servants do not usually have the possibility to learn more about aspects of inclusive communication: in their training, gender equality, cultural diversity, and avoidance of stereotypes are taught.

Conclusions: more cooperation is needed—both national and international

According to the results of the ELIPS survey, most European countries have policies related to the functionality of language used in public administration. However, policies on various aspects of good language are quite fragmented and they are developed mostly on a national scale and among experts of each individual field.

There are a number of examples of cooperation in different fields at the national level in European countries already. For example, some national organizations responsible for plain language have their representatives in specialist groups on terminology or on boards of organizations responsible for terminology or easy language.

An organization responsible for plain language may also provide opinions and other linguistic assistance to an organization responsible for terminology, and vice versa.

To increase cooperation at the national level even more, the researchers in the ELIPS group give a number of recommendations. Although these recommendations are originally meant for EFNIL member institutions, they can be useful to others, too. For example, an institution or organization working in a special field could convene national actors from other fields (for example, plain language, easy language, terminology, inclusive policies) to examine possibilities of promoting their fields together or forming national policies, such as language, as a part of accessibility policies.

Furthermore, institutions and organizations working on different fields could carry out joint projects or lobby together for the creation of national policies or to influence their content. If no responsible body for any given field exists, any interested national organization or private actor could bring together individual actors in one or several such fields (plain language, easy language, gender neutral language, inclusive language) and try to find resources for a platform to exchange best practices and find common goals of action.

To encourage international cooperation, EFNIL could organize conferences and meetings for its member institutions and outside experts about plain language and other fields of the survey. This could be done in partnership with international organizations like PLAIN and Clarity, and it would provide opportunities for networking and common projects for those involved or interested in the same fields.

The themes could focus especially on fields that have so far received less attention (for example, easy language and inclusive language).

A new round of data collection on its way

The ELIPS project group has launched a second data collection round in May 2023 with a renewed questionnaire. The section about inclusive communication has been expanded and a new section about the existence of scientific research initiatives in the fields of interest of the survey has been added. The new survey will be published online at www.efnil.org.

This article is a summary of this [original report](#).

Salli Kankaanpää PhD is the Head of Language Planning Department at the Institute for the Languages of Finland. She acted as an official delegate of the Institute for the Languages of Finland in EFNIL for 12 months in 2021–2022. In her career, she has also worked as plain language specialist at the Institute and investigated administrative and legal language. Currently, she is leading a project for the Prime Minister's Office of Finland on how jurists and laypersons understand legal Finnish and Swedish.

Aino Piehl worked until June 2023 as EU and plain language specialist at the Institute for the Languages of Finland. She coordinated in 2019–2022 the project group of the European Federation of National Language Institutes that conducted the first ELIPS survey.



Emily Halloran

Editor, Plain English Foundation

Artificial intelligence (AI) language models and proofreading software are becoming more sophisticated. And as professionals who work with language, we're encouraged to collaborate with these tools. But what is it like working with AI tools? And are there limits to our collaboration?

To find out, we tested some tools on the executive summary chapter of a sustainability report. While the report is fictitious, it's based on hundreds of similar documents that Plain English Foundation edits.

We asked our human editors and some AI tools (Word, Grammarly, ChatGPT) to collaborate on a plain language edit to improve the executive summary's structure, design, and expression. We compared the human-generated and AI-generated contributions, and this is what we found.

For a detailed look at our research and the original and edited executive summary, [read our white paper](#).

Can plain language editors collaborate with AI?

Human editors improve structure while AI ignores it

The original summary uses a narrative structure that buries recommendations under process detail. In our edit, we brought the recommendations forward so that decision-makers can easily see what they need to do.

In contrast, AI writing tools such as ChatGPT [can't restructure documents yet](#), and good structure is a critical element of a plain language edit. Next, we asked the AI tools to break the text into sections that were roughly the same size and add information-rich, consistent headings. While one AI tool did suggest numbering each section to enhance readability, that was the extent of its suggestions.

In our edit, we introduced information-rich and consistent subheadings to guide the reader.

We also asked the AI tools to write an overview to help orient the reader. While some AI tools can [summarize text](#), the results were underwhelming. The overviews suggested by the AI tools lacked specificity and included unnecessary detail. Most concerningly, this collaboration introduced some factual errors.

For example, in one summary, the AI tool changed the research type mentioned in the report from "qualitative" to "quantitative". But our human editors noticed that the fictional team had used both qualitative and quantitative data, and their edit reflects this.

Human editors understand design far better than AI

While one AI tool suggested numbering headings, it failed to address crucial design aspects, such as page layout, readable type, and visual elements.

With prompting, the AI tool introduced bulleted lists. But it turned the entire executive summary into a bulleted list, transforming it from a useful guide into an overwhelming series of disconnected items.

Our human-generated edit:

- includes plenty of white space
- removes italics and uses bold for emphasis
- includes judicious use of lists and tables
- adds meaningful icons.

AI is OK at expression, but human editors are better

When we asked the AI tools to reform words and grammar, the main differences between AI editor and the humans were:

- the degree of nuance in the suggested edits
- the radical nature of the changes made
- the level of consistency in identifying and resolving issues.

Nuanced edits

Much of the original summary includes long sentences in an official tone that is hard to read and lacks specificity and accountability.

Our human editors reworked the summary using a professional, yet friendly tone.

The AI editor's reform was less successful, using a tone that was too conversational for this type of report. For example:

The Sustainability Team got the cool task of checking out how Ivy Insurance is doing in terms of sustainability.

This version lacks some nuance that we can only achieve with human collaboration. To help the AI tool get closer to the mark, we gave it several prompts that were based on our plain language knowledge.

Radical edits

So how did the AI tool handle grammatical errors? It identified issues, such as subject-verb agreement, a misplaced modifier, and a list that lacked parallel structure. While it suggested how to fix the list, it failed to provide any clear guidance for the other issues.

The human editors applied the principles of plain language expression and rewrote the summary. Our aim was to make it easier to read with significantly shorter sentences. This strategy often results in a revised text that looks radically different from the original and, in this case, eliminates errors.

Consistent edits

We often find that problems with word choice appear more than once. For example, authors write "conduct a review" when "review" will do. Human editors can spot these word choices and replace them with better alternatives.

In our test, AI tools only occasionally identified words that we would replace. For example, they suggested changing "following" to "per" or "under". But they didn't suggest replacing "indicate" with "show".

Without human collaboration, this difficulty with consistency means that users will likely end up with an inconsistent document. This makes the document harder to read and readers less likely to persist with it.

AI's strength is grammar, but human editors are more thorough

Grammar is where AI editors perform the best, and this is one area for collaboration. Generally, we found that the AI editors could identify grammatical errors and issues with punctuation. Some proofing tools can even follow a style guide and ensure that a text is consistent with an organization's preferred style.

But AI isn't perfect. The tools we used did pick up a misplaced modifier, but they did not consistently pick up Oxford commas or comma splices.

Human editors know when to collaborate

Our little experiment shows some of the limits of collaboration with AI. Until AI tools can restructure your content so it's easy to absorb, enhance the layout so it's more engaging, and rewrite the expression for maximum clarity, these tools work very much for rather than with human editors.

Your best bet is still to place them in the hands of a plain language editor who understands when to collaborate and when to work independently. They'll ensure your documents are clear, precise, and readable.

Emily Halloran is a plain language editor for Plain English Foundation. Her master's research focused on plain language and ignited a passion for clear communication. She uses plain language to remove barriers that prevent people from accessing vital information. Emily's determined to take difficult documents and make them easier to understand. Her attention to detail and efficiency means clients such as New South Wales's largest council receive plain language interventions that benefit upwards of 400,000 people. And Emily doesn't just edit—she writes too. Her content for Plain English Foundation makes plain language accessible to the public, with useful and practical advice.



**Dr Mischa Corsius and
Dr Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer**

HAN University of Applied Sciences

This paper describes a mixed method research conducted by three different research groups on the same corpus of government text documents. The paper first addresses the need for this research, then the different methods and their strengths. Finally, the results are summarized, with a short example and recommendations for further implementation.

Context

Despite strong efforts by the Dutch government to use plain language (see: [Gebruiker Centraal](#); [Direct Duidelijk](#); [Netwerk Begrijpelijke overheid](#); [Programma Prettig contact met de overheid](#); [Mens Centraal](#) and in Flanders, Belgium, the [Heerlijk Helder](#) campagne), there is still much to be done.

Three researchers in the area of language understanding, human communication, and media design, joined forces to expand the

Mixed method approach for studying the comprehensibility of texts

Monitor 2021 study (Pander Maat & Van der Geest 2021). On behalf of the Dutch government and the Union for the Dutch Language (Taalunie), researchers from Utrecht University (UU) and HAN University of Applied Sciences established a collaborative initiative to measure the comprehensibility of government texts. The initiative resulted in a thorough research study (Corsius et al. 2023).

Research methods

Three research groups approached governmental organizations, as well as municipal governments, and regional water authorities to contribute letters and leaflets they use to interact with citizens. To maintain a sufficient level of comparability between the texts, the text collection was restricted to two themes: payments and healthcare. Over 70 government organizations submitted 240 texts either on paper or online.

Each researcher had a main expertise in conducting research. In this study the collected texts were subjected to three different research methods. Each method had its own merits. For example, one method is stronger in

handling high volumes, another in collecting individual user perceptions.

The automatic text analysis (method 1) handled the complete corpus of text—over 200 online or offline documents. The check interviews (method 2) were held with 24 texts, conducted by government communication professionals and facilitated by our researchers. The structured interviews combined with reading tasks and eye-tracking (method 3, involving individuals with different backgrounds and reading levels) were held with five texts per theme (ten in total). Each smaller set was a subset of the previous set.

Research results

The combined study provides insights into the comprehensibility, applicability, and perception of governmental texts. The study shows that for the majority of the texts, at least 30% of the Dutch population has difficulty understanding them. Comprehensibility is hindered by abstract, unfamiliar words, and long sentences. Plain language, familiar words, and short sentences can improve comprehensibility.

Quality aspect	(1) Automatic text analysis	(2) Check interviews government professionals	(3) Structured interviews with individuals
Comprehensibility	++	++	+
Applicability	-	-/+ (indirect)	+
Perception	-	+	++
Problem analysis features	++	++	++
Quantity (volume of texts in the study)	++	-/+	-/+
Quality	-	+	++

Table 1: Overview research methods and focus per method

Applicability is difficult as the texts offer different follow-up possibilities depending on the personal situation. Applicability can be improved when the text focuses on one outcome and unnecessary information is eliminated.

Dutch readers tend to perceive the texts with mostly negative feelings. Perception of the texts can be improved by using the right tone and addressing the reader appropriately. In general, readers report that they have a hard time identifying the relevant parts for their situation, especially when there are many options. Additionally, readers tend to quickly lose their way when texts are long. Better search capabilities for web texts can help in this regard.

Mixed method

In addition to these substantive results about the comprehensibility of the texts, the unique aspect of this study is the combination of three methods. The combined approach of research methods has proven to be methodologically effective, due to their complementary nature and practical applicability. For future research, we advise applying the mixed method approach as a tool to study text comprehensibility.

As shown in Figure 2, the different research methods each have their strength on a different part of the quantitative–qualitative axis. The strength of automatic text analysis is in handling large amounts of volumes and performing standard analysis. The structured interviews are rather time-consuming, but provide detailed qualitative insights. The number of documents processed with check interviews with the government professionals lies in between either of the other methods, while the results are both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

To give a simple example: the automatic text analysis may give a positive score of the comprehensibility score of the sentence length or



Figure 2: The three methods plotted on the quantitative–qualitative axis

difficulty of the words/language used, but the method will not notice if relevant information is missing (like contact information) or what action the reader should do next. The other methods complement the automatic text analysis with that kind of information. The check interviews with the government professionals will help to spot missing information, and the individual readers help to identify whether this information is concrete enough to act upon.

Implementation

The collaboration of the three different research groups yielded more than just the results of the separated methods. The methods have some overlap. The overlap helps to validate insights from one method to another. Thus, this approach of mixed methods reinforced the research of the three different groups and the insightful results it yielded. The rich dataset also provided the participating organizations with practical recommendations and guidelines.

On top of that, the participating organizations valued in this research the opportunity to learn from each other. Finally, the participating organizations recognized that the combined approach of these research methods provides them with a detailed insight to implement monitoring mechanics themselves and adapt it according to their needs.

The mixed method monitor also recommends investigating the communication process together with citizens:

- How do texts connect with each other?
- And what are the related improvement points?

Involving users in the design process of products and services helps to set up a value-driven interaction process with the government and governmental organizations.

Mischa Corsius is a researcher at the Media Design research group at HAN University of Applied Sciences. She graduated as a computational linguist at Tilburg University and subsequently did some years of PhD research there. Subsequently, she held various positions at the Tax and Customs Administration at the interface of ICT and communication: from developing user documentation for internal software systems, user research, and concept development of digital innovations, to product owner of the website. As a practice-oriented researcher, she works on digital solutions for government and industry with user-oriented focus.

Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer is a professor at the Media Design research group at HAN University of Applied Sciences. He started as a linguist in psycholinguistics and continued with a PhD research on designing with children. He uses his knowledge of language, psychology, and design as an expert in user research, playful media, and concept development. He works with diverse user groups and leads international UX studies with Elsevier, Randstad, and Philips, among others. As a designer-researcher he works on human-machine interactions in digital transformations and innovations; among other things in the field of healthy lifestyle with exergames and technology adoption in mental health care.



Mixed-method aanpak voor het observeren van de begrijpelijkheid van teksten

mediadesign bundelden hun krachten om het Monitor 2021-onderzoek (Pander Maat & Van der Geest 2021) uit te breiden. In opdracht van de Nederlandse overheid en de Taalunie hebben deze onderzoekers van de Universiteit Utrecht (UU) en de HAN University of Applied Sciences een samenwerkingsproject opgezet om de begrijpelijkheid van overheidsdocumenten te meten. Dit initiatief resulteerde in een grondig onderzoek (Corsius et al. 2023).

Onderzoeksmethodes

De 3 onderzoeksgroepen benaderden overheidsorganisaties, gemeentelijke overheden en regionale waterschappen om brieven en folders aan te leveren die ze gebruiken om te communiceren met burgers. Om een voldoende vergelijkingsniveau tussen de teksten te behouden, werd de tekstcollectie beperkt tot 2 thema's: betalingen en gezondheidszorg. Meer dan 70 overheidsorganisaties hebben in totaal 240 teksten ingediend, zowel op papier als online.

Elke onderzoeker had zijn eigen expertise in het uitvoeren van onderzoek. In dit onderzoek werden de verzamelde teksten onderworpen aan 3 verschillende onderzoeksmethoden. Elke methode had zijn eigen sterke punten. Bijvoorbeeld, de ene methode is sterker in het

verwerken van grote volumes, terwijl de andere sterker is in het verzamelen van individuele gebruikerspercepties.

De automatische tekstanalyse (methode 1) verwerkte het volledige tekstcorpus (meer dan 200 documenten (van diverse kanalen, zowel offline als online)). De check-gesprekken (methode 2) werden gehouden met 24 teksten. De gestructureerde interviews (methode 3) werden gehouden met 5 teksten per thema (in totaal 10). Elke kleinere set was een subset van de vorige set.

De check-gesprekken

werden uitgevoerd door overheidscommunicatieprofessionals en werden gefaciliteerd door onze onderzoekers. De gestructureerde interviews werden gehouden met lezers met verschillende achtergronden en leesniveaus. De deelnemers kregen tijdens het interview leestaken en hun leesgedrag werd gemonitord door middel van eye-tracking.

Onderzoeksresultaten

Het gecombineerde onderzoek biedt inzichten in de begrijpelijkheid, toepasbaarheid en beleving van overheidsdocumenten. Het onderzoek toont aan dat voor de meerderheid van de teksten minstens 30 procent van de Nederlandse bevolking moeite heeft om deze te begrijpen. Begrijpelijkheid

wordt belemmerd door abstracte, onbekende woorden en lange zinnen. Begrijpelijkheid kan verbeterd worden door gebruik te maken van eenvoudige taal, bekende woorden en korte zinnen. Toepasbaarheid is lastig omdat de teksten verschillende vervolgmogelijkheden bieden afhankelijk van de persoonlijke situatie. Toepasbaarheid kan verbeterd worden door de tekst te richten op één specifiek resultaat en overbodige informatie weg te laten.

Nederlandse lezers hebben over het algemeen een negatieve beleving van de teksten. De perceptie van de teksten kan verbeterd worden door de juiste toon te gebruiken en de lezer op passende wijze aan te spreken. In het algemeen geven lezers aan dat ze moeite hebben om de relevante delen voor hun situatie te identificeren, vooral wanneer er veel mogelijkheden zijn. Bovendien raken lezers snel de weg kwijt bij lange teksten. Betere zoekmogelijkheden voor webteksten kunnen hierbij helpen.

Mixed-method aanpak

Naast deze inhoudelijke resultaten over de begrijpelijkheid van de teksten, is het unieke aspect van dit onderzoek de combinatie van drie methoden; de "mixed-method aanpak". De gecombineerde benadering van onderzoeksmethoden heeft zich methodologisch bewezen als effectief, vanwege de complementaire aard en de praktische toepasbaarheid. Voor toekomstig onderzoek raden we aan om de mixed-method aanpak toe te passen als een instrument om de begrijpelijkheid van teksten te bestuderen.

Zoals te zien is in Figuur 2, hebben de verschillende onderzoeksmethoden elk hun sterke punten op een ander deel van de kwantitatief-kwalitatieve as. De kracht van automatische tekstanalyse ligt in het verwerken van grote hoeveelheden tekst en het uitvoeren van standaardanalyses. De gestructureerde interviews zijn tijdrovend, maar bieden gedetailleerde kwalitatieve inzichten. Het aantal verwerkte documenten bij de check-gesprekken met overheidsprofessionals ligt tussen beide andere methoden in, terwijl de resultaten zowel kwantitatief als kwalitatief van aard zijn.

Om een eenvoudig voorbeeld te geven: de automatische tekstanalyse



Figure 2: The 3 methods plotted on the quantitative–qualitative axis

kan een positieve score geven voor de begrijpelijkheid van de zinslengte of de moeilijkheid van de woorden/taal die gebruikt worden, maar de methode zal niet opmerken als relevante informatie ontbreekt (zoals contactinformatie) of wat de lezer vervolgens moet doen. De andere methoden vullen de automatische tekstanalyse aan met dat soort informatie. De check-interviews met overheidsprofessionals helpen bij het opsporen van ontbrekende informatie en de individuele lezers helpen bij het beoordelen of deze informatie concreet genoeg is om op te acteren.

Implementatie

De samenwerking van de 3 verschillende onderzoeksgroepen heeft meer opgeleverd dan alleen de resultaten van de 3 afzonderlijke methoden. De methoden hebben enige overlap. Deze overlap helpt om inzichten van de ene methode te valideren met die van een andere methode. Op deze manier heeft de mixed-method aanpak het onderzoek van de 3 verschillende groepen versterkt en heeft het waardevolle resultaten opgeleverd. Het uitgebreide gegevensbestand heeft de deelnemende organisaties ook voorzien van praktische aanbevelingen en richtlijnen.

Bovendien waardeerden de deelnemende organisaties in dit onderzoek de gelegenheid om van elkaar te leren. Ten slotte erkenden de deelnemende organisaties dat de gecombineerde aanpak van deze onderzoeksmethoden hen een gedetailleerd inzicht biedt om zelf monitoringmechanismen te implementeren en aan te passen aan hun behoeften.

De monitor beveelt ook aan om samen met burgers het communicatieproces te onderzoeken:

- Hoe sluiten teksten op elkaar aan?
- En wat zijn de gerelateerde verbeterpunten?

Het betrekken van gebruikers bij het ontwerpproces van producten en diensten helpt bij het opzetten van een interactieproces met de overheid en overheidsorganisaties dat op burgers gericht is.

Mischa Corsius is onderzoeker bij het lectoraat Media Design van de HAN University of Applied Sciences. Zij is afgestudeerd als computationeel taalwetenschapper aan de Universiteit van Tilburg en heeft daar vervolgens nog enige jaren (promotie)-onderzoek gedaan. Bij de Belastingdienst vervolgens heeft ze diverse functies gehad op raakvlak van ICT en communicatie: van het ontwikkelen van gebruikersdocumentatie bij interne software-systemen, gebruikersonderzoek, conceptontwikkeling digitale innovaties, tot aan product-owner van de website. Als praktijkgerichte onderzoeker werkt ze aan digitale oplossingen voor overheid en bedrijfsleven waarin de gebruiker als uitgangspunt genomen blijft worden.

Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer is a lector bij het Lectoraat Media Design van de HAN University of Applied Sciences. Hij is begonnen als taalwetenschapper in de psycholinguïstiek en is doorgegaan met een promotie-onderzoek naar ontwerpen met kinderen. Zijn kennis van taal, psychologie en design zet hij in als expert op gebruikersonderzoek, playful media en conceptontwikkeling. Hij werkt met uiteenlopende gebruikersgroepen en leidde internationale UX-onderzoeken met o.a. Elsevier, Randstad en Philips. Als ontwerper-onderzoeker werkt hij aan mens-machine interacties in digitale transformaties en innovaties; o.a. op het gebied van gezonde leefstijl met exergames en technologie adoptie in de GGZ.

Kwaliteitsaspect	(1) Automatische tekstanalyse	(2) Check-gesprekken overheids-professionals	(3) Gestructureerde interviews met lezers
Begrijpelijkheid	++	++	+
Toepasbaarheid	-	-/+ (indirect)	+
Beleving	-	+	++
Probleemanalyse kenmerken	++	++	++
Kwantiteit (aantal teksten in het onderzoek)	++	-/+	-/+
Quality	-	+	++

Tabel 1: Overzicht van onderzoeksmethoden en focus per methode



Kate Harrison Whiteside
Director and Instructor, Plain Language Academies

How did you get started in plain language?

I was doing plain language editing before I had a name for it. My background in journalism led to consulting for agriculture clients, government, business, and non-profit. When I discovered what it was at a meeting in Vancouver, I connected with Cheryl Stephens. We've been partnering, mentoring, sharing, and working together since. I stick with it because I believe we all deserve to understand information.

What has been the most surprising thing you've learned about plain language that you've observed or been a part of?

The growing global commitment to plain language in many languages is intriguing. The [Plain Language Academies](#) has connected me with students, consultants, and organizations from Japan to South Africa, all committed to plain language and their readers and clients.

Ask the Experts

What has been the most powerful example of collaboration in plain language that you've observed or been a part of?

Aside from co-creating PLAIN and International Plain Language Day, the massive global collaboration that went into creating and finalizing—a key word—the Plain Language ISO standard has been incredible. It will move our profession forward, give us strength, and enhance our services to others. I am so grateful to the commitment to the process and proud of everyone's work creating a solid foundation to help us continue growing.

What kinds of collaboration do you think is still needed in plain language?

We need to continue to share our knowledge with and motivate others. I always say plain language knows no boundaries, and this is so important now. We have seen socially, politically, and culturally harmful miscommunications that demonstrate a demand for plain language.

What is your advice for someone who wants to find more collaborators in their plain language work?

PLAIN and its connected organizations, members, and events all offer excellent opportunities to connect with potential collaborators. I've found great connections from around the globe, sometimes taking many months after an event or initial meeting. When I look for people to

join an initiative, I never give up if they say "not now." Today we have the internet services to easily expand our networks, it's brilliant. If your work isn't serving up an opportunity, look for an organization, like a non-profit. Audiences and accessibility are two of the most important components of successful plain language communication, and both need more attention. There are many organizations and clients in our communities who can benefit from your knowledge and skills. Go for it.

If you could give a plain language makeover to any text in the world, what would it be?

Where should I start? I'd get rid of all small print, especially on products we use daily like medicines, cooking items, and technical tools. Our new plain language standard points out how important it is for our information to connect with readers. Well, they have to be able to read it first!

Or I'd start with the healthcare field. We have just been through a pandemic, we have a global aging population, and we have a new generation of users who see things differently. If we are going to succeed on having a healthy population and planet, we need to communicate clearly with each other in plain language.

Kate Harrison Whiteside is the co-creator of PLAIN, and the Plain Language Academies which won the 2021 Cheryl Stephens Innovation Award.



Sarah Slabbert
Owner, Plain Language Institute

How did you get started in plain language?

My academic background is in sociolinguistics and research. I own another company called BHI32. We work mainly in the water sector. When we first started with work in this sector, the jargon was overwhelming. It took me several years to find my way through the maze of acronyms, terminology, governance structures, and technical legal documents. Part of our task was—and still is—to make water sector documents more accessible to the public and audiences outside the sector. This can range from policy documents, research reports, monitoring and evaluation instruments to the water and sanitation questions on the national census questionnaire.

We never realized that we were doing plain language work! It was only when the [Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008](#) was published that I could give a name to the work we have been doing. Plain language is a legal requirement for all private sector consumer communication in South Africa in terms of article 22 of this Act. I established the Plain Language Institute in 2009. The rest is history, as they say.

What has been the most surprising thing you've learned about plain language in your career?

Can I add "exciting"?

All of us have probably grappled at some point with the term "plain language". I have learned in my career that sometimes plain language has very little to do with language and sometimes it has everything to do with language.

In traditional plain language work, dealing with "language" was often the last and easiest part of the task. Most of our time went into asking questions about the original document, researching the topic, talking to target audiences, restructuring the content to be more logical and more accessible, and designing the layout.

On the other hand, in our user research work in South Africa, we often work intensively with language aspects. For audiences who do not speak English at home, following plain language guidelines for English doesn't necessarily produce a clearer result. This forces one to experiment with the English text, and test and revise, until you find words and sentences that your audience can understand and relate to.

The ISO plain language standard has opened up the scope of plain language to cover the full spectrum of human communication in the digital age. It gives us as plain language practitioners a tool that we can apply when we, for example:

- advise a city on its stakeholder engagement program for water reuse
- assist a company to attract more users to its app
- assist an organization to decide which communication platform will work best for a specific target audience, or

- advise an organization on how you translate a wellness concept for other cultures.

The opportunities are endless.

What has been the most powerful example of collaboration in plain language that you've observed or been a part of?

To develop an ISO standard, one has to engage with stakeholders and collaborate with experts in the relevant field.

For my colleagues, Nadja and Chani, and me, the global collaboration to develop the ISO standard was an unbelievably enriching experience. The same goes for the volunteer work in the IPLF's committees. We found plain language soul mates with shared understanding, shared experiences, and shared values.

What kinds of collaboration do you think is still needed in plain language?

- More collaborative work between plain language practitioners in languages other than English
- Collaboration with accessibility experts
- Collaboration with experts in the fields of content design and user experience (UX) research
- Collaboration with software developers that work in the artificial intelligence space.

What is your advice for someone who wants to find more collaborators in their plain language work?

Join one of the three plain language organizations. Participate actively in their activities. Volunteer to serve on committees. Attend one of their conferences and share your research.

If you could give a plain language makeover to any text in the world, what would it be?

Auditors' reports and financial statements.



Dr Neil James
Chair, International Plain Language Federation

Plain language celebrated a major milestone in June 2023, with this publication of our first international standard: ISO 24495-1. But some emerging initiatives suggest we are about to embark on the next major stage of our journey.

ISO standard

ISO standard 24495-1 establishes the governing principles and guidelines for developing plain language documents. It was developed by the plain language working group (WG 11) of ISO's Technical Committee 37, which deals with language and terminology standards. The Federation's three members (PLAIN, Clarity, and the Center for Plain Language) are all liaison organizations of this working group.

The "1" in 24495-1 means this is only the first part of what will build into a larger standard. TC 37 held its annual forum in Brussels in June, during which WG 11 members considered potential new parts to expand on the governing principles and guidelines. Already, further parts on legal communication and on science writing are underway, and the group is considering parts for health

Standards and more: News from the Federation

and finance. Similarly, there may be parts detailing guidelines for design and evaluation, and a part on terminology.

The Brussels meeting also discussed a strategy to prioritize what to develop and how to integrate the parts effectively. We will also consider what ought to be within the standard and what may be better as a supporting document.

Localization

To make the most of ISO 24495-1, the Federation's Localization and Implementation Committee has been actively promoting the standard through communication tools such as:

- FAQs about the standard, how to use it, and where to get it
- a [media release](#) in 32 languages
- a [guide](#) and [checklist](#) on adapting the standard
- the [benefits for various areas of expertise](#)
- social media tiles, banners, posts, and countdown communications.

The committee's extensive preparations have paid off, with some excellent results to date:

- 411 communications sent to government and private organizations
- over 2,300 views of the English press release
- over 5,700 visits to the ISO standard page on the IPLF website
- 630 views of the IPLF's standard FAQ pages
- over 3,000 uses of the Federation's link to the ISO standard.

ISO's TC 37 invited Localization Committee Chair Gael Spivak to present on the Federation's communications strategy at its annual forum in Brussels. The feedback was very positive, with one delegate commenting that we provided "a model for how to approach communications about a standard." Another delegate suggested "they should promote all standards like that."

Certification

With an ISO standard now available, one of the first questions many ask is how they can be certified against it. The short answer is that you can't—at least not yet.

ISO 24495-1 is what is called a "guidance" standard, which is not prescriptive enough for certification. For that, there would need to be a "requirements" standard administered by recognized certification and accreditation bodies.

The Federation's Certification Committee has been exploring what kind of system we might set up for plain language, and it is drafting an issues paper to assess:

- costs and benefits
- priority areas for certification—such as organizations, individuals, training, or documents
- standards to certify against, and the relationship with ISO
- organizational structure required, costs and timeline.

We have also been testing the likely demand for certification through surveys and focus groups. For example, a survey this year of more than 100 organizations found there is keen interest in certification, but further work is needed on the criteria, standards, costs, and duration.

A second survey is assessing certification for individual practitioners, while some focus groups will explore the feasibility of certification for plain language training.

The surveys and the issues paper will be completed in 2023, after which the Federation will consult with its members about the next steps.

Training guidelines and resources

The Training Guidelines Committee completed its own survey in 2023, which included:

- 120 plain language trainers
- 167 recipients of plain language training.

The results were very useful. People who hire plain language trainers reported that they lack a consistent, reliable way to find qualified candidates. And most participants supported the need for training guidelines to assess the skills of trainers or to provide a baseline for the training itself.

The survey also found that learners want certification, tools and practical examples. Gaps in current practice included how to implement plain language as a strategic priority and get buy-in from managers. Based on survey results, the committee will next:

- draft guidelines for plain language training
- identify platforms for sharing them
- develop a business model for making them available.

This means its work now intersects with that of the Training Resources Bank Committee which is working on a suitable platform for plain language resources. As a result, the Federation decided to merge these two committees to build a platform and business model to support a growing range of resources for its members. This will be an exciting development to watch for in 2024.

Bibliography and definition

A more immediately available resource is the bibliography for the ISO standard, now published on the [IPLF website](#). This supports ISO 24495-1 by listing resources that:

- provide empirical evidence for the standard's guidelines
- illustrate how to apply a principle or a guideline.

The [bibliography](#) will be a living document, with new references added continuously.

Of course, the first resource that the Federation developed a decade ago was the [definition of plain language](#), which is now available in 28 languages. The drafting of the ISO standard raised some suggestions about the definition, which the Federation will look at later in 2023.

Future directions

The agenda we have been working to was set out in an [options paper](#) developed over ten years ago. With much of this in place or under way, it is timely to consider the work program for the decade ahead.

In June, the Federation Board reviewed an audit of the original options paper recommendations, along with a list of current and potential goals. It decided to develop these as a "Future Directions" document for consultation with its member organizations. Just as we did for the options paper, this will provide a great opportunity for members to have their say about the future agenda.

Federation review

Any review of future directions should include the role of the Federation itself. Like the options paper, our current organizational model was developed a dozen years ago, and it is worth assessing whether it is still fit for purpose.

The Federation has initiated a governance review that will examine its:

- strategy and operating model
- board and committee structure
- memberships
- legal status and by-laws
- communications, administration, and finances.

The review will report to the Board by the end of 2023, after which it will consult with the boards and members of its constituent organizations about the way forward.

Further information

If you would like to know more, please visit www.iplfederation.org or contact chair@iplfederation.org. The Federation is also presenting two panel sessions at the PLAIN 2023 conference in Buenos Aires:

- Setting the Standard (on the ISO standard, localization, and the definition).
- Future Directions (on certification, training and resources, and future strategy).

You can get involved by joining one of the Federation's member organizations:

- PLAIN: www.plainlanguagenetwork.org
- Clarity: www.clarity-international.org
- Center for Plain Language: www.centerforplainlanguage.org

Neil James is the Chair of the International Plain Language Federation. He was co-founder of the Plain English Foundation in Australia and worked as its Executive Director for 20 years until retiring from that position in 2022. Neil has a doctorate in English and has published more than 100 articles, essays, and reviews on language and literature.

