text it **EASY**

Method and operational framework for writing plain language texts in a learning context

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Introduction

Plain language is a powerful tool to ensure that all learners, regardless of their literacy level, background, or learning ability, can access, understand, and retain key information.

In educational and professional training environments, the use of plain language contributes to inclusion, better comprehension, and more effective learning outcomes.

This document outlines a comprehensive method and operational framework to guide educators, instructional designers, and institutions in creating or adapting materials in Plain Language for learning contexts.

Essential knowledge before starting

Before writing or adapting content, it is useful to understand the main ideas behind plain language and to build some practical experience. This section presents the key resources and basic skills that help professionals prepare for the writing work.

Start by reviewing the guidelines and standards that describe the main principles of plain language:

As a part of the Text it easy! project we released a <u>Pedagogical guide for trainers and professionals</u> that aims to offer a comprehensive framework for the adoption and promotion of plain language within educational institutions and cultural organisations, with a particular focus on vocational training settings.

ISO 24495-1:2023 is the international reference for plain language. It offers a clear definition of what plain language is and describes the principles that support reader comprehension: logical organisation, clear structure, familiar wording, concise sentences, and strong focus on the reader's context and purpose. The standard also includes criteria for evaluating whether a document allows its intended audience to quickly find, understand, and use the information it contains.

There are also specialised ISO standards for fields where plain language must be adapted to specific professional requirements:

ISO 85774 provides guidance for writing clear and accessible legal communication, with principles to help legal texts become easier to understand and use.

ISO 86938 applies similar principles to scientific communication, offering guidance on how to present scientific information clearly and accurately for different audiences.

Practice plain language writing and adaptation of difficult content

Even when you know the rules, you need to practise plain language writing to become proficient.

Each time you work with plain language, you encounter new cases and gain experience solving them, either while writing or when receiving feedback.

This document provides tips to help you address specific difficulties and suggestions for obtaining useful feedback to support continuous improvement. To begin, you can benefit from the following:

Training

Training courses can be found online. The Text-it-easy project released an e-learning module, available on the website in the "Get certified" tab. Some associations and private organisations also offer specialised training sessions on plain language.

Peer-to-peer learning

Working with someone who is familiar with plain language and can review your content is a helpful way to improve your skills.
Start with simple sentences, then practise with documents designed for plain language exercises, and finally apply these methods to real-life content.

1. Methodological Principles of Plain Language Writing

Step 1: Define learning objectives clearly

Plain Language should be used for all audiences, regardless of their proficiency level. However, writing an email to a colleague with a high reading proficiency is different from writing a course for primary school students.

Therefore, depending on the content and the readers, you will adapt your deliverable. To do so:

Try to learn more about your audience:

- Define the learners' profiles: age, mother tongue, targeted language proficiency, cognitive or learning disabilities, educational background, familiarity with the topic, etc.

- You can review previous interactions you have had with them or even conduct interviews (for tips on how to conduct interviews, see 1.5).

- Consider the learners' assumed knowledge.

Take into account the context in which the learners will read the document:

Consider what they will use to read it, how much time they have, how long they will stay focused, how interested they will be in the document, etc.

Identify clearly what the learners need to know, do, or feel after reading the content:

- Use action verbs (e.g., "identify", "explain", "apply") to describe what learners will achieve.

- List the specific questions that should be answered after the content is delivered.
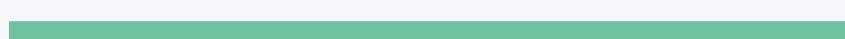
Step 2: List and prioritise content

- Identify key concepts and essential information to include.

- Break down complex ideas into small, sequential parts.

- Organize them so that the most important information is at the beginning and the logical structure is coherent.

- Eliminate redundancy, tangents, or digressions unless required.

Step 3: Write in plain language

First draft

Now you can start writing the text in plain language, applying the different rules (see above).

For instance:

- Use common, everyday words (e.g., "use" instead of "utilise").

- Prefer the active voice: "Trainers give feedback" instead of "Feedback is given by trainers."

- Use headings, bullet points, and numbered steps.

- Read your draft to see if all the information listed in Step 1 is included.

First version

After your first draft, perform a self-assessment:

- Read the text again to make sure it respects plain language guidelines.

- Start with the words, then the sentences, and finally the overall structure of the text.

- Depending on your familiarity with plain language rules, you can read the text while analysing whether it respects the rules or check each rule one by one.

- Using a plain language adaptation checklist can be effective. This checklist can be generic or specific to a context (organisation rules, type of content, reader characteristics, etc.) - you can find such a checklist in our e-learning course.

Helpful tools

Tools that simplify text in one click (ChatGPT prompts or other "magic tools") are not a complete solution. LLMs do not know your audience, do not follow the necessary steps to simplify a text, and do not give you enough control over choices regarding specific words, sentences, or structure.

You can use tailor-made automatic tools that guide writers step by step with detailed explanations of difficulties and how to simplify them (in French: U31.io, in English: readable.com). These tools also offer precise diagnosis of the readability level of your text and highlight remaining difficulties.

Step 4: Layout and other considerations

Depending on the context, you may need to consider other elements to make your content even more accessible.

Design

Using a specific (and consistent) layout and including illustrations can help people read and understand content more easily, as it guides attention, supports comprehension, and reduces cognitive load.

Digital use

If the content is intended for digital use, ensure that it is accessible to people with disabilities (for example, those who rely on screen readers or keyboard navigation).

For web content, it must comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

f you provide learners with slides or videos, accessibility rules apply and specific actions are needed to make them fully accessible (for example, Microsoft PowerPoint guidelines.

Step 5: Assess the readability of your content

Even when following the rules, creating a Plain Language document can be difficult because of your own subjectivity (familiarity with the topic, your language proficiency, your assumptions regarding the audience's reading difficulties, etc.). External assessment is therefore a crucial step.

Here are some ways to carry out useful assessments:

A simple scoring index such as <u>Flesch–Kincaid</u>, <u>Gunning Fog Index</u>, <u>SMOG Index</u>, <u>Fry Readability Formula</u>, <u>ARI</u>, or the <u>Coleman–Liau Index</u> can give you a general idea of the difficulty of your final content. These tests estimate the approximate reading grade level of a text, but they are based only on sentence length and word complexity. More information about these indexes is available <u>here</u>.

Some websites generate these scores automatically, for example:
<u>https://readabilityformulas.com/readability-scoring-system.php</u>

More sophisticated scoring tools also exist (for instance, <u>U31.io</u> in French, or <u>readable.com</u> in English), which provide detailed diagnosis and automated readability analysis.

Peer-to-peer: someone familiar with plain language can review your text and provide direct feedback.

Reader panel: you can set up a panel that represents your target readers and ask them to read your content and share their impressions. Feedback can take different forms:

- Binary questions: "Did you understand all the information (instructions, explanations, actions required)?" "Did you find the text easy or difficult to read and understand?"

- Open question: "What do you think of the readability of the text?"

- More detailed questions: "Which words or sentences were difficult to understand?"

- Specific questions about the content (quiz), for example: "Who is the main character?", "What are the steps for writing in plain language?"

Depending on the context, you can also measure the effectiveness of the plain language version indirectly, for example by checking learner satisfaction or seeing whether grades improve after the plain language content becomes available.

2. Methodological principles for adapting existing content into plain language

Adapting a difficult text into plain language requires a structured approach that respects the original meaning while improving clarity and accessibility. The methodology is slightly different from writing new content.

Step 1: Define learning objectives clearly

Before adapting a text, identify what the learners need to know, understand, or be able to do after reading it. Clarify:

- the target audience (age, language level, familiarity with the topic, potential learning difficulties)

- the context in which they will read the content

- the essential knowledge or actions expected from them

These elements help you decide what information must be kept, simplified, or reorganised in the adapted version.

Step 2: Analyse the source text

Read the full text and identify elements that may cause difficulty. For example:

- highlight complex or uncommon words

- underline long or dense sentences

- mark paragraphs that contain several ideas at once

- note redundancy or unnecessary digressions

Determine which parts are essential for understanding and which can be simplified or removed.

Then extract the key information and outline the logical structure of the original text.

Possible reorganisation:

- Break down complex ideas into smaller, sequential units.

- Link each unit with the part of the original text it comes from (for example, by numbering).

- Reorder the units so that the most important information comes first.

- Create a clear outline that will guide the adaptation process.

Step 3: Write the adapted text in plain language

First draft

Adapting content into plain language is not a word-for-word rewriting exercise.

Start from your reorganisation plan. For each simplified unit:

- return to the corresponding part of the original text

- rewrite it using plain language principles: familiar vocabulary, clear sentence structure, logical order, active voice, etc.

- build paragraph by paragraph following your new structure

Include simple transition words to connect ideas smoothly.

After completing the draft, check that it is coherent and that all necessary content has been included.

Compare it directly with the original text to ensure that essential meaning has not been lost.

First version

Review your draft by looking at:

- vocabulary clarity

- sentence length and structure

- information order

- coherence between ideas

- overall readability

A checklist designed for plain language adaptation can help ensure consistency.

Useful tools

Tools such as U31.io (French) or readable.com (English) can assist by identifying long sentences, complex vocabulary, or structural issues. They provide diagnostics and readability scores to guide improvements.
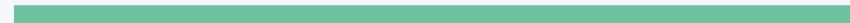
Always compare the original and adapted versions to make sure nothing essential is missing.

Step 4: Layout and other considerations

Apply visual and accessibility principles to make the adapted text easier to read.
This can include:

- clear headings

- consistent layout

- accessible formatting for digital content

- adding visuals or spacing for clarity

Step 5: Assess readability

Use both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the effectiveness of your adaptation.

You can:

- compare readability scores between the original and adapted versions

- test both versions with separate groups of readers (A/B testing)

- use quizzes or targeted questions to check comprehension

- assess indirect indicators, such as learner satisfaction or improved performance

3. Organisational framework for implementation

The operational framework provides concrete steps and tools to support institutions and educators in applying plain language methods in their learning environments.

Step-by-step process for creating plain language texts

- Develop institutional policies that encourage the use of plain language.

- Raise awareness at management level, for example:

    - by sharing <u>the document</u> created by Text-it-easy

    - by showing before/after examples together with learner feedback (general comments and quiz results)

- Offer training sessions for teachers and content developers.

- Include plain language guidelines in teaching manuals.

- Integrate plain language criteria into teaching evaluations.

- Create internal plain language checklists with a score for each content produced or reviewed.

- Set dedicated time for the adaptation of existing resources and for peer-review processes when new content is created.

- Monitor outcomes (for example: comprehension scores, learner engagement, general feedback).

- Establish a regular review cycle for plain language audits.

- Create and use specific templates to ensure accessibility.

- Make every plain language version available for future reuse.

Continuous improvement

- Collect data on learner outcomes, satisfaction, and comprehension.

- Identify how these results relate to learner needs and education standards.

- Collect learner feedback regularly to identify gaps in understanding.

- Monitor outcomes continuously (for example: comprehension scores, learner engagement, feedback).

Roles and responsibilities

- Content writers: apply plain language rules and structure lessons.

- Trainers/teachers: provide feedback and adapt oral delivery accordingly.

- Review teams: ensure that materials meet readability requirements and learning objectives.

- Learners: participate in testing and provide feedback.

4. Monitoring and review process

Implementing plain language is not a one-time effort. Institutions should regularly monitor how learners interact with the materials and how well they understand them. Tracking learner outcomes and feedback helps identify areas that require adjustment or further clarification.

Materials should be updated when accessibility requirements or educational standards evolve.

A structured review process should be integrated into curriculum updates so that all new materials remain clear, accessible, and aligned with learner needs.

Conclusion

Plain language supports inclusion and helps all learners access, understand, and use essential information. By following a structured method and an operational framework, institutions can embed clarity and accessibility throughout the development of educational content. This strengthens learning equity, supports compliance with accessibility standards, and improves educational outcomes.

Plain language writing is key to fair, effective learning. Whether creating new materials or adapting existing ones, using plain language leads to clearer content, stronger engagement, and better results for all learners. It is a practical and inclusive approach that benefits both educators and learners.