

How Accessible Is Your Written Content?

By Cathy Basterfield

- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 21, says all people must have access to the information they need in a way they can use.
- Many people across the world face challenges with reading or understanding written information in the way it is written.
- Easy English or Easy {your language} is an approach to sharing information to make it accessible for more people.

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#) was adopted in 2006. Article 21 of the Convention recognizes that people with a disability need to have access to the information they need in a form they can understand and meaningfully use — and in the same timeframe as the rest of the community.

The Scale of the Problem

When organizations only provide written information in complex (or even [plain](#)) language, they are not meeting their obligation under Article 21. The percentage of the population that have literacy challenges is larger than many realize. It is an enormous hidden disability across all communities.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC, 2012), an international assessment of adult literacy skills, managed by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), assessed adult literacy competency across 39 countries. This was the third variation of this data collection across more than 15 years.

In Australia, for example, the study found 44% of the adult population (16-65 years) did not have the literacy skills to manage a range of day-to-day reading tasks — a figure that did not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, nor people in institutions. In the U.S., it was [52% of the adult population](#) (over 100 million adults), once again not including people who lived in institutions. New data is being released in late 2024 that is expected to find at least as many or possibly more people do not have literacy skills to manage day-to-day reading tasks.

Plain Language

The definition of plain language is

*'A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.'*¹

Last year (2023), the International Standards Organisation (ISO) released ISO 24495-1:2023(en) - Plain language — Part 1: Governing principles and guidelines² to further guide development.



1 <https://www.iplfederation.org/plain-language/>

2 <https://www.iso.org/standard/78907.html>

Some specific criteria a plain language writer considers in their development is the logic of content, removal of technical words or jargon and the construction and length of sentences.

Critically, plain language considers the intended reader, as being the person with competent literacy, usually an adult with at least low to mid-secondary school level reading skills. With these reading skills, a person uses their reading skills to 'read to learn.'

Ask yourself, how many hours, you, as a competent reader spend reading in your day – both at home and work and all other daily activities. As a competent reader, you should be able read, understand and use plain language, even if you are not highly knowledgeable on that topic. As noted above, in Australia this is only useful to 56% of the adult Australian adult population, and 48% of the American adult population.

Easy English or Easy [your language]

To meet the needs of people with low literacy, information needs to be available in an easy-to-read version. It must never be a 'nice to do' option at the end of a project.

Easy English uses the same definition for Plain Language and follows ISO 24495-1:2023(en) - Plain Language.

The intended reader for Easy English though, is a person who does not see themselves as being a reader, or does not usually engage in reading tasks by preference. It is a hidden disability, as shown by the data above, that is rarely, if ever considered in the development of information for the general population or in workplaces or in the community.

Hence, you will see differences with Easy English in areas such as:

- the amount of white space on a page
- the removal of further more complex, technical or jargon-based words that a more competent reader may know or be able to read, understand and use
- sentences range in length from 5 to 8 words.

For the last 20 years in Australia, our team have been developing and writing evidence based best practice Easy English. We run regular training and webinars on a range of topics as they relate to Easy English, including "Digital literacy for people with low literacy." (Hint: the person with low literacy is highly unlikely to be able to use websites — websites are based in literacy).

In more recent years, we have been working with communities in other countries and other languages, including Canada, Singapore, and Malaysia.

The Easy English audience is **any person** with low literacy. Easy English uses universal design principles to reduce barriers for any person who has low literacy, irrespective of their background or the reason for their need of Easy English, i.e., people with different disabilities, people with changing or deteriorating abilities, First Nations peoples, older people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and all other people of different ages with low levels of literacy.

In addition, anyone may, at some point in their life, have low literacy, including during emergencies, during health events, or in legal contexts. Using a trauma-informed lens, recognizing that trauma can adversely affect an individual's well-being, including physical and mental health you, as the creator, do not know who may need Easy English. Making Easy English readily available increases access for all.

Quality best practice Easy English ranges in language reading equivalence from grade 0 to grade 3, with an **average of grade 1 6** reading skill equivalence, depending on the specific topic. This must never be the sole measure of Easy English. Other indicators the language is in Easy English include:

- one idea per sentence
- 5–8-word sentences
- all in active tense

Images are simple, clear, iconic, and are highly guessable. There are specific guidelines for the layout. All these elements combined make it an effective tool to be developing and making available to any person with low literacy.

Who may need Easy English?

The person with low literacy, but not the only audience, are people who:

- do not see themselves as readers
- rarely sit to attempt to read, often describing themselves as perhaps reading only 15 minutes a day, if they have to.
- rarely choose to read anything
- do not expect to be able to read and understand any written content.

Many report having low self-esteem and low confidence in reading.

Readers describe Easy English as having:

- few words
- short sentences
- use more words they know
- more space on a page.

They report often being surprised about how many words they can read and then understand when it is in Easy English.

Following our research, quality Easy English has measurable and repeatable guidelines which all trained writers can implement. Easy English incorporates the [International Organization for Standardisation \(ISO\) Technical Standards for Plain Language writing \(T37\)](#), and [Plain Language ISO 24495-1 \(2023\) Governing Principles and Guidelines](#). We were involved in early phases of the technical standards development.

Examples on our website showcase quality Easy English from around Australia and internationally for all the community. <https://accesseasyenglish.com.au/access-easy-english-examples/> or visit our second website for people with low digital skills, www.readee.com.au.

